

THE BEACHES OF HELL

Boyd Cochrell, as an officer in the U S. Marines, fought in the Pacific for two and a half years: hence the unquestionable authenticity of his novel. He says of it ' I picked a man in the front lines who was a private and nothing but a private, who fought the fighting as it was fought, and who didn't get wounded or killed to resolve all those perplexing plot dilemmas I chose a very young man because the average age of the Marines during the height of the war was twenty I chose one who would see it through to the bitter end because I have always wondered who won the war after all those terribly heroic officers were killed or disabled into the arms of Deborah Kerr '

So Private Willy came into existence, seventeen when the story begins, and with a romantic notion of war which was to be modified by action at Tarawa, Saipan, Tinian, Okinawa By the time the Marines reached gutted Nagasaki, in 1945, Willy was as realistic as any veteran except about peace, for which he was unarmed But though it frightened him, he was not without hope, ' because I am only twenty he thought as he stared across the water to that hazy solidity on the horizon And if I've learnt this much I may be able to learn the rest '

The Beaches of Hell

Boyd Cochrell



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EXETER

he practiced looking older. He had a sober face to begin with, a firm mouth and square jaw. But the trouble was that he had only a blond fuzz for whiskers and a button nose, and his skin was so smooth that even when he grinned scarcely a wrinkle formed. The nose and grin made him look like an innocent blue-eyed five-year-old, yet maybe Lloyd or Frances would notice a change. It would mean a lot to have one of them say Happy Birthday.

He went into the living room. Lloyd stood in his shorts beside the oil heater, a cup of coffee in his hand. The heater had not been on very long, because the top of it was still cool and Lloyd was covered with goose pimples. Andy laid his hands on the heater, and Lloyd scowled at him. He also had blue eyes, but his sharp nose and loose-lipped mouth made him look profane instead of innocent. He was eight years older than Andy.

"Well?" Lloyd said.

"Well, what?" Andy asked.

"Well why didn't you put oil in this goddamn stove last night?"

"I forgot." Andy stooped to pick up the morning paper Lloyd had dropped beside the stove.

"Forgot my eye," Lloyd said. He never got as mad as Ralph used to, but he made more noise. "You didn't forget anything except you're supposed to help out around here. Next time you pull a stunt like that I'll yank you out of bed on your ear."

"Okay, okay," Andy said. "Keep your shirt on."

"And go get dressed," Frances called from the kitchen. "You'll be late for work again, then you'll have something to holler about."

"Oh drop dead," Lloyd told her. He finished his coffee and set the cup on top of the heater. "I think I'll join the Seabees anyhow."

"That'll be the day," Frances said.

Lloyd pulled the paper from Andy and dropped it on the floor again, then went into the front bedroom to dress. Andy picked the paper up once more and laid it on top of the stove to read the headlines.

**"British Bombers Rain Tons of Block-Busters on Berlin. . . .
Reds Capture Millerovo, Rail Junction, on Way to Rostov. . . .
British Advance Toward Tripoli. . . ."**

Yeah, it was a great birthday. Really great. A happy home and a world at war. Ever since he could remember there had been some kind of war—in China, Europe, Africa, and finally Pearl Harbor. The world was tearing itself apart, and here he sat—waiting to grow up. The only thing he actually knew about war was a meaningless backwash; bonds, rationing, Geiger Field, the aluminum plant where Lloyd worked, Farragut Naval Base where Andy had worked last summer. A naval base on an inland lake still seemed silly, and soldiers and sailors around Spokane gave him no clue to the truth of war. How does a block-buster bust? How do you capture a rail junction? If there had to be battles a man should get a taste of them.

So maybe I'll enlist, he thought. Maybe Judy would fall all over herself to marry me if I wore a uniform.

But that was a bigger laugh than Lloyd's enlisting. Men in uniform seemed somehow different in basic structure from Andrew Willy, as if at draft age a secret organ developed—a super-adrenal gland or something. Besides, when you enlisted you could no longer dream of a true home with a sweet bride.

He turned to the funnies and read them, then went to the kitchen. Frances sat at the table with Arnold in her lap, feeding him baby food straight from the can. She was sort of pretty in a pouty way, but she always wore an old housecoat during the day and never kept the kids clean. They were cute kids too, and he liked them except when he was classed as one of them. Carol Jean sat splashing a spoon in the milk of her cereal. She grinned at him, and he ran his hand through her tangled hair as he went toward the breadbox.

"There's no bread for toast," Frances told him. She could not make a simple statement of it. She had to be shrill and accusing. "Honest to god, Andy, I don't know what gets into you. You were supposed to get a loaf Saturday, and you better not forget it tonight. Get more cereal too. There's only enough for this morning."

"Okay, okay," he said. And Happy Birthday to you, he thought.

He looked in the cupboard for a clean bowl, but there were

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The chapter quotations
are from Pope's translation
of Homer, mostly the *Iliad*

*But why, like infants, cold to honour's charms,
Stand we to talk, when glory calls to arms?*

prelude

1

He woke up seventeen years old and believed something should happen. You cannot go on growing up forever. At some point the process must be complete, and he was all there now as far as he could see—stature, strength, and sense enough for at least a junior-grade man. He knew women. Most fellows considered that the dividing line between men and boys, so once you had crossed over why hang around waiting for more age to accumulate? You began to look older after a while, but was there really any other difference between seventeen and twenty-seven?

It was cold in the bedroom. He pulled the covers around his ears, buried his face in the pillow, and stretched out to his full five feet five inches. With everything locked inside him and nothing entering, he felt like an outsize egg about to hatch a large truth.

Marry me, Judy. Marry me today for a birthday present.

He held his breath until he nearly split wide open with the almightiness of himself, then rolled his head to the side, exhaled, and opened one clear blue eye. Immediately some little thing left him, and several extraneous things entered. He smelled a damp-diaper smell from the empty crib in the corner. He saw his niece's empty

bunk along the opposite wall. From the living room he heard the radio's racket and above it the voice of his brother.

"This weather'd freeze the rigs on a brass monkey," Lloyd said.

"My god," Frances answered from the kitchen, her voice shrill. "I said last summer let's move to a nice warm shipyard. But oh no. You hadda stick to good old Spokane."

Oh hell, he thought. Maybe other kids don't mind waiting to grow up because they have real homes with mothers and fathers instead of brothers and sisters-in-law and nephews and nieces. But when are you old enough to stop being a nuisance in somebody else's house?

It was January 18, 1943, and youth was a handicap he wanted to get rid of. He had been young too long in makeshift homes with makeshift love. He could not remember his mother and father, yet sometimes he suspected he might not have loved them either. If his brothers were typical offspring, his parents would have been a disappointment too. It was not a nice thing to think, but how else could you account for Lloyd and Ralph? Was it because they lacked proper upbringing or because blood will tell? It often worried him. If it was in the blood Andrew Willy would never amount to anything, and he very much wanted to amount to something for Judy's sake.

He loved Judy Powell more than he had ever loved anyone, and he had a date with her that night. She was sweet, she was virginal, she was everything he respected. And the most amazing thing about her was that she seemed to love him. Since school had begun in the fall they had been almost inseparable. With her he felt like another person. He felt bigger, cleaner, wiser. He felt proud and protective and determined to be a doctor or high-school teacher or insurance man. He did not know exactly what to make of himself, but he knew it must be more than a farmer like Ralph or a mechanic like Lloyd.

Oh brother, he thought. Let's get this show on the road.

He threw back the covers and got out of bed. He dressed quickly in the cold and hurried to the bathroom. In the medicine-cabinet mirror he did not appear to have aged overnight, yet for a moment

none. He fished a used one from the stack of dirty dishes on the drainboard and held it under the hot-water faucet, which ran icy cold. He swore to himself. Couldn't something be made to happen? Couldn't you turn and say, Look. People live better than this. Today I'm seventeen years old, and I'm through being the kicked-around orphan of the family. Five years ago I ran away from Ralph, and you were nice to take me in, but now I've outgrown you. Today I'm going to quit school and get my old job at Farragut back and marry Judy Powell.

He turned and got ready to say it. Arnold had baby food on his chin, and Frances scraped it off with the spoon.

"Go get me a clean diaper," she said.

"Look," Andy told her.

"Where in hell are the car keys?" Lloyd called from the bedroom.

"How should I know?" Frances answered him. "You had 'em last."

Oh cripe, Andy thought. They'd die laughing. Who gets married at seventeen? Who even has the nerve to ask a girl when he hardly has the nerve to kiss her?

2

It was cold and clear outside with no snow on the ground to make it look like winter. Andy kept his hands deep in the pockets of Lloyd's old overcoat as he walked down the block to Bony Leeper's house. After whistling for Bony he heard a formation of fighters in the sky but could not see them. Their motors receded westward urgently, and in a little while they would be beyond Hanford where Ralph's farm was. High-flying instruments of war headed for skies he had never seen, for things he would never know unless Japs attacked Spokane itself. . . .

"How come you're early?" Bony asked as he came onto the porch with his coat half buttoned. He had two books under one arm and a piece of toast between his teeth. He was medium-sized

and cocky and not much good, but he lived close and they always went to school together. He also had a basement where they could get drunk sometimes on his old man's liquor.

"Hurry up," Andy said. "It's cold."

"What's your rush? We'll have to wait for a bus anyway."

"Okay, okay. But let's get moving."

Bony buttoned his coat and took the toast from his mouth. They walked beneath bare maples toward the bus stop. Bony had a chubby face with a weak chin, and a lot of his cockiness was only skin deep. He was eager to raise hell but never wanted to take the blame if they got caught. He cried that time cops picked them up for turning in a false alarm.

"Why the chip on your shoulder today?" he asked.

"You got jelly on your chin," Andy said. Bony wiped it off.

"Yeah, but what're you mad about? Lloyd on your tail?"

"No more'n usual. A regular Monday morning."

"Yeah. I didn't get my English done either."

"You can copy mine."

"Thanks, pal. Got your physics too?"

"Most of it. Look, Bony. This is crazy."

"What's crazy?" He was finishing his toast. "I didn't have time."

"I mean school."

"I thought you liked school. You get good grades."

"I did like it till the war started."

"Well for god's sake. We've only got this year left."

"Why? What difference will five months make?"

"We'll graduate, if I don't flunk out. What're you driving at?"

"I dunno. I just think something should happen."

Bony threw the crust of his toast away and wiped his mouth. "Swell," he said. "Let's get drunk Saturday night."

"That's not what I mean."

"Well, who could we neck with? Darlene's sore at us."

"Oh skip it," Andy said. "I'm sick of kid stuff."

"Kid stuff, for god's sake? What do you want?"

"Something important for a change."

"What's more important than a piece of ——"

"Skip it, I said. Skip it if that's all you can think of."

"All right, all right. But what's eating you?"

"I dunno."

They were walking faster now and could see their breaths in the cold air. *British Advance Toward Tripoli*; Andrew Willy advances toward North Central High School. It was no good. There was no satisfaction to storing up knowledge against a future that did not quite exist. This morning war seemed to compress time around him like a thin shell that would soon break and leave him no time.

"You've been with Judy too much," Bony said.

"That's none of your business," Andy told him.

"Yeah, but you take it too serious. You're no fun this way."

"Grow up, Bony."

"Why grow up if you don't have fun?"

"It isn't fun when you feel cheap afterwards."

Bony whistled and minced along with his shoulders weaving.

"Holy smoke," he said. "Where'd you get the halo?"

"Oh cut it out."

"Well, you've gone buggy over that dame. You didn't use to preach about— Hey!" He took one hand from his coat pocket and pushed Andy toward the crossing at the corner. There was a bus loading at the stop on the opposite side of the street. They could have caught it, but suddenly Andy hated going to school. He hated the idea of fidgeting in classrooms while other men fired fieldpieces in battle or worked in defense plants. Five years ago he had run away from his brother Ralph and improved his lot by living with Lloyd. All at once he wanted to run away again—this time from the whole sad state of being young.

"Wait," he said. He caught Bony's arm and held back.

"Come on." Bony tried to pull loose. "We can catch it."

"No, wait," Andy said. Bony pulled free, but the bus began to move.

"Well for god's sake, Andy." Bony hit him roughly on the back with his books. "Why'd you make us miss it?"

"Let's play hooky," Andy said. For a moment Bony teetered on the curb in surprise. His face lit up, then he frowned. He had

brown eyes that sometimes appeared sensitive, but he liked to act tough.

"What for?" he asked. "My old man'd kill me."

"Let's see about a job at Farragut again."

"Oh baloney. That's harder work than school."

"Everything's work, Bony. Would you rather enlist?"

Bony turned and stared at him. They were both bareheaded and hunched up in their overcoats, each breath visible. They stood on the corner across from a familiar bus stop and looked at each other as if something had abruptly changed for them. Bony's cockiness vanished, and Andy felt naked cold, as if some protective shell had really cracked.

"You're kidding," Bony said. "You wouldn't go see about it when my old man raised Cain because the cops picked us up."

"I didn't think we could then. I'm ready now."

"You'd have to get your parents' consent. Lloyd's or whatever."

"He'd just as soon get rid of me. It's got to the point where I'd rather shift for myself, Bony. I don't know where to start, but let's go downtown and look into it."

Bony hesitated. He had said before that he could use the women and liquor that army men had, but he did not actually want to know about war itself. He was pretty conventional when you came right down to it. He got sore at his old man but felt bad when his old man jumped on him. He had a soft quality that he could not always hide, and he avoided Andy's eyes when he saw their seriousness.

Then there was a gap in traffic, and Bony stepped off the curb.

"Oh hell," he said. "Let's talk it over later." He began running. "Come on, Andy. I can't afford to play hooky today."

But there was a downtown bus coming on Andy's side of the street. He was only a few steps from the stop, and he felt stubbornly committed. Nothing was going to happen unless he made it happen. Nobody but himself realized the importance of his seventeenth birthday.

"I'll see you tonight," he called across the street to Bony.

"Hey!" Bony hollered. But the downtown bus had already

stopped, and Andy was on it before either of them could change his mind.

3

He studied a recruiting poster on the sidewalk in front of the Welch Building. Recruiting offices were inside. You could walk in and say Here I Am, and somehow you might emerge a soldier. It was very strange, and eventually you could get killed somewhere in the war.

The sidewalks were crowded. A private in an overcoat and muffler and with bare red ears bumped against him, neither pausing nor apologizing. Andy blushed. He was not even there as far as adults were concerned. People hurried past in the cold without glancing at him, and his attempt to run away from himself became a tight lump in his throat. He wanted Judy more than he wanted to be killed in a war, but who ever heard of playing hooky to prepare for marriage? He shoved his fists deeper into the pockets of Lloyd's old overcoat and walked away.

Then he did not know where to go or what to do. He spent the morning in hotel lobbies trying to keep warm and wishing Bony had come along. At noon he went to a soda fountain for lunch. It was a place where he had often gone with Judy, yet at this time of day it was unfamiliar. Too many servicemen were there. He felt small and out of place among them. They were not capturing rail junctions or showing any indication of being able to, but still they had been entrusted with uniforms. He stood inside the door thinking he should leave, but there was one empty stool at the end of the fountain. He slid onto it.

Next to him a sailor was propositioning the waitress. Her hair was badly peroxidized, and she had a very large bust.

"How about it, beautiful?" the sailor asked.

"You swabbies are all alike," she said.

"You should know," he told her.

"Don't get smart, mac."

"Just give me a break, honey. What time you off?"

"Too late for you. I've got a split shift."

"I've got a seventy-two."

"Grand. What's the entertainment?"

"Good whisky and a room with a radio."

"I couldn't make it before midnight."

"Shall I meet you here?"

"You might. If you're still sober."

"Trust me, baby. Trust me."

The sailor held up his hand with thumb and forefinger circled, then spun off his stool and went whistling to the door. The blonde wiped the counter where he had been, and Andy stared at her pneumatic chest until he realized that she was watching him with utter contempt.

"What'll you have?" she asked. Her mouth was heavy, and the corners of it stuck together with too much orange lipstick. She was pretty, but she was hard. She was so hard that you felt a shock in meeting her eyes. She seemed to know every aspect of male lechery and detest it all, as though love and affection had long since been proven shams.

"Two hamburgers and a milk shake," Andy said. He looked down at his hands and cleared his throat. "Chocolate shake," he added. She did not move, and he glanced up at her again. She was staring over his shoulder toward the door, and he heard it slam open. He turned to see two Air Corps enlisted men standing there. They were very drunk but very happy. One of them was holding the door open and holding onto the other for support. The soberest one conducted with his hand while they both sang.

"Off we go, into the wild blue yonder." Then the one with the door slammed it shut, and they both shouted, "Crash!"

They laughed hilariously, and everyone near the door laughed too. Andy doubted that he should join in, but he did. The blonde said, "Oh god," and the two drunks staggered toward her.

"Sweetheart!" the soberest one said. "We've come to get you for a big party." He put his free arm across Andy's shoulder and

leaned over the empty stool, lowering his voice. "Set us up a beer, honey."

"Get outta here, doggies," the blonde said.

"Give us a tumble, lover-girl," the other fellow told her. He had trouble standing, even with support. "We need a beer, honest."

"You know this ain't a beer joint."

"Well kiss my eye," said the soberest one. "We thought it was."

"Get out," the blonde said. "Before the MPs show up."

"Sure, honey. But how's about a big fat date later?"

"I've got a date. Now shove."

"You'll be sorry. Lotsa liquor, lotsa fun."

"I said shove, and I mean it."

"Okay, honey. Okay."

The soberest one tipped his cap amiably. The other fellow tried to, then they staggered to the door. They got it open and got half-way out before they backed in again and stepped aside with a deep bow. A marine walked past them. His green overcoat had a single red chevron on the left sleeve, and he did not look at anyone or anything as he came to the fountain and slid onto the stool next to Andy. The Air Corps men went outside once more, sang, "Off we go, into the wild blue yonder——" and the door slammed behind them as they shouted "Crash!"

The marine private first class winked at the blonde.

"Hi," he said. "When did you hire doormen?"

"We get all kinds," she said, and for the first time there was a trace of animation in her face. "How's the gyrene?"

"Great," the pfc said. "What time you off tonight?"

"I've got a date."

"Break it. I leave tomorrow."

The blonde's eyes softened a bit.

"Make it eleven thirty," she said. "I'll have to dodge a swabby."

"Right. Give me a chocolate shake."

"Right." She glanced at Andy coldly. "What was yours again?"

He had to clear his throat before he could repeat his order, and then he saw that the blonde was actually young, if you could call it

that. He did not know how to judge age between his own and the beginning of conspicuous wrinkles, but he believed the blonde was no older than his sister-in-law Frances. In spite of her hardness she magnetized males, and it occurred to him that he might date her if he were a marine.

He had never thought of them before. The Army seemed the natural thing to enlist in, or the Navy if you liked water. But all at once the Marine Corps became more persuasive. He knew nothing about marines except that they had defended Wake Island and sweated a victory from the jungles of Guadalcanal, yet even this tough blonde gave them preference. And no matter how remote the war was from Spokane and North Central High School, he would go to it eventually through the draft if nothing else. Wars last a long time, and when he did go he would like to be wearing a uniform more distinctive than olive drab. He wanted to be very good in the war for Judy's sake, since there appeared so little chance of being good at doctoring or teaching or selling insurance. Maybe marines were automatically good.

The blonde set a milk shake in front of the pfc and the hamburgers and milk shake in front of Andy. He ate slowly, from time to time turning his eyes to the coat cuff on the counter beside his own. That heavy green wool seemed to have an aura of purpose and tradition. The sleeve of Lloyd's hand-me-down overcoat was as threadbare as Andy's life. In a marine overcoat he would inevitably be a better man than his brothers, bad blood or no bad blood. All he needed was the courage to declare himself.

The marine beside him stood up to go. For a moment their eyes met. The marine was heavily tanned and so handsome that you could understand why the blonde preferred him. His green cap had a jaunty twist to the frame, and in the shadow of the visor his eyes were dark and probing. He smiled slightly, with a faint condescension that he had every right to. For a second Andy was going to ask how you joined the marines, then a soldier shoved in to get the vacated stool, and the marine was gone.

It was six o'clock when he got home. Lloyd was lying in his undershirt on the davenport with a glass of beer in his hand and the rest of a quart sitting on the floor beside him. Arnold was crying on the linoleum in the center of the room. Carol Jean was tearing up newspaper in the kitchen doorway. The living room was overheated now, and the only light in it came from the kitchen. The radio played out music like the fairy-tale mill grinding salt eternally into a saturated sea, and you could smell cooking sauerkraut all over the house.

"Where you been?" Frances called as soon as he closed the front door. "Why didn't you come home after school and get the groceries?"

He was not ready to tell them about playing hooky and planning to divorce himself from them. He went to toss his coat on his bed.

"Goddammit," Lloyd said. "What's got into you lately? Why don't you get home once in a while to help Frances?" Then he hollered at her with more immediate annoyance. "Can't you feed Arnold and shut him up?"

"I only got two hands," she said. "You hold him a while."

"Oh, let him bawl," Lloyd said. Andy stood near the heater among drying diapers. "Go help Frances so we can get out of this madhouse."

"I'm not going to baby-sit tonight," Andy told him quietly.

"The hell you're not," Lloyd said.

"He's never here when you want him," Frances called.

"Where do you think you're going on a Monday night?" Lloyd asked.

"I've got a date," Andy said.

"You just think you have."

"I have, and I'll keep it."

"Not if I say you'll stay home."

"I've got a right to go out sometimes."

"Oh sure, and diddle the girlies whenever you get the urge."

"Shut your dirty mouth."

Lloyd sat up in surprise. Usually he got away with teasing his little brother. Andy seldom forgot his debt to Lloyd, but this concerned Judy. She was never involved with the rough stuff that went on in Bony Leeper's basement—the dark and ineffectual side of Andrew Willy resembling his brothers. He would not let Lloyd imply anything improper about her.

"Well, well," Lloyd said. "Who's telling who to shut his mouth? You'll get your ears laid back, boy, if you get too smart."

"Let him alone, Lloyd," Frances said from the kitchen doorway. She reached down and slapped Carol Jean for chewing a piece of paper. "Go wash for supper, Carol." Then she went to scoop Arnold off the floor into her arms. "Come on," she told Lloyd and Andy as she started back to the kitchen. "It's on the table."

Lloyd picked up his glass of beer and the bottle and followed her out. Andy waited a moment for better control of himself. When he did take his place at the table opposite where Carol Jean would sit, he found a gift in white tissue paper lying on his plate.

They had remembered his birthday after all, and he did not know what to say. He tore open the tissue paper and recognized immediately a white scarf Lloyd had received from Aunt Sophie a year ago Christmas and had never worn. Then his eyes stung and his throat got tight, because it was so hopelessly wrong. Frances had thought of his birthday at the last minute and rummaged through the house for a present. He had been remembered but without pride or distinction, like a stray dog.

He looked across the clothless table top, across a bowl of wienies and dishes of boiled potatoes and sauerkraut. There was also a bakery cake still in its cellophane wrapper, and he tried to smile at Frances who was shoveling baby food into Arnold's sticky mouth.

She looked tired, and he felt sorry for her. She did the best she knew how. Lloyd too looked tired after his day at the mill. He worked hard for his family, and there was no reason to expect him to do more for his little brother than take him in and tolerate him. But when you were the little brother, being tolerated was not enough.

"Thanks," he said, laying the scarf beside his plate.

"It ain't much," Frances told him. "But happy birthday, kid."

"My god," Lloyd said. He blinked with a sort of amusement. "No wonder he feels his oats if today's his birthday. How about that?" He set his fork down and reached for the remaining half bottle of beer on the drainboard. "I'll buy you a drink to celebrate."

"No, thanks," Andy said. "I really do have a date, Lloyd."

"Let him go," Frances said before Lloyd could object again.

"Sure." Lloyd even smiled. "I forgot this was an occasion."

"Would you do something else for me?" Andy asked.

"That all depends."

"Would you sign a release so I can join the Marine Corps?"

It was as quiet in the kitchen as it could be with the radio in the living room pouring out "Cow Cow Boogie." But the radio was part of this place, like the light and air and walls. He had the papers in his overcoat pocket and was more conscious of their presence in the house than he was of music. He had not known whether he would dare use them, yet the scarf somehow made it necessary. Only one thing could change his mind.

"No," Frances said at last. She was sitting with Arnold's spoon in her hand, not moving. "Don't do it, Lloyd."

"Where'd you get that notion?" Lloyd asked.

"I'd be drafted anyway. I'd rather pick a good outfit."

"Do you want to be a big hero or something?"

"Don't tease him," Frances said. "He's serious."

"But why all of a sudden can't you wait for the draft?" Lloyd asked.

"Because I'm—I'm already too old to depend on you guys."

"My god, Andy," Frances said. Arnold was fussing for the rest of his supper, but she paid no attention. "What are you trying to prove? Have we been so bad to live with that you want to get yourself killed?"

"No." It surprised him that she guessed anything of the sort, and he could not go into the matter of a proper home. "I won't necessarily get killed, because somebody must come back from it. It's just that I'm old enough to shift for myself, and there's hardly any

place else to shift these days. Since we're in the war you can't always do what you like, and I'm willing to help out to get the damned thing over with." They were staring at him, and his ears were burning. "Oh hell. Maybe I won't do it. Maybe I'll get cold feet, but will you sign the papers if I—well, if I still want to in the morning?"

"You mean you've already got papers?" Frances said.

"Yes. I skipped school today."

"Oh, Andy."

"Well how about that?" Lloyd finished the beer in his glass. He seemed flabbergasted. When the war started he made sure his draft board had him classified as both a father and essential defense worker. He looked at Andy now as though he did not believe anyone voluntarily risked his neck. "I remember the day you were born," he said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing. Only it seems funny. You sure didn't look like a marine then. You don't very much now. You're awful little, kid."

"They'll take me. Size isn't everything."

"He's got guts," Frances said. "But don't let him enlist."

"Why not?" Lloyd said. "If he's full of patriotic sunshine why should I stand in his way? It beats me how anyone gets eager for the war, but I suppose somebody has to. I kind of admire you, Andy."

"Oh for god's sake, Lloyd." Frances shook Arnold irritably. "Shut up," she told him. Then she turned and raised her voice shrilly. "Carol Jean! Quit playing in that water and get in here to supper."

All right, Andy thought. Now it's up to you, Judy.

5

Her father was a conductor on the Northern Pacific railroad, and she hoped to be the class valedictorian. She was shy and almost beautiful, but her face had not filled out enough yet for the largeness of her dark brown eyes. Her hair was black, and she

tried to hide her shyness behind a wide friendly smile. She wore a white coat and white fur-lined boots, and it made him ache to see her.

"Why did you play hooky today?" she asked as they left her house.

"Oh, I had some things to see about," he told her.

"Bony said you might be looking for a job or something."

"Well, sort of. Do we have to go to this commencement, Judy?"

"I'm afraid so. I couldn't go out on Monday otherwise."

"Couldn't you say you'd been, and we could talk somewhere?"

"What's the matter, Andy?"

"Nothing. Only I'd rather stay away from school after today."

"But I promised Katherine and Betty I'd be there. We'll want friends at our graduation, and we can talk somewhere afterwards."

So they went to the mid-year graduation exercises and held hands while diplomas were being passed out. It was disconcerting to have a hundred fellow students solemnly declared ready to take their places in the world, and Judy held his hand as though she felt an urgency too. Her hand was warm and slender, and touching it made his heart beat like a dribbled basketball.

But when they stopped for milk shakes later the place was noisy and crowded, and they had to share a table. He wanted to sit there until everyone had gone, but she said her mother would have a fit if she stayed later. It was bitterly cold as they walked back to her house, and all his hope seemed frozen solid in the pit of his stomach. He could not speak until they had reached her front porch and she turned at the top step to say good night. The corner street light made shadows through bare trees, and it was so quiet that you could almost hear molecules of moisture popping like popcorn into ice crystals as the temperature dropped.

"Judy," he said. "It's pretty cold, but listen a minute."

"Won't you come in, Andy?"

"No, thanks." He never went in because that left him free to keep her from meeting Lloyd and Frances. "It's rather personal."

"You should have worn ear muffs." She arranged the birthday scarf more firmly around his throat, then put her hands in their

fuzzy wool mittens over his ears. "Your poor ears will freeze."

"I'm all right," he said, but her actions were the most womanly thing anyone had ever done for him. Suddenly he put his arms around her waist and held her fiercely against him. "Marry me," he said.

Her hands slid down to his shoulders, and she pressed her cheek against his. Her voice was soft and gentle.

"I hope I can some day."

"Some day doesn't mean much with the war."

"You won't be drafted for ages yet."

"Marry me now so we can be happy till I am drafted."

She seemed surprised and drew her head back. He had not mentioned marriage before, but then he had never been seventeen before either.

"We haven't finished school yet," she said.

"You could finish while I work."

"But I want you to finish too. You're a good student."

"The diploma isn't necessary. It's what you know that counts."

"Well, yes. But that isn't what people think."

"We're as grown up as those kids who graduated tonight."

"I guess so. Only——"

"I've worked at Farragut, Judy. I can support a wife. I love you more than anything in the world, and that's what matters."

"Andy." Her body stiffened. She leaned back with his arms still around her waist. His eyes were deeply shadowed so that their blue did not show, and his head was very round against the light. She thought he was awfully good-looking in a rather boyish way, but his words baffled her. "Do you mean right now? Are you serious?"

"Yes, Judy. Now. Next week."

"Well for pity's sake."

He was suggesting something she had never dreamed of. She had always believed the order of her own life was the pattern of all lives. You started as a baby, grew slowly into grade school, into high school, out of high school, and gradually developed into an adult under the careful supervision of your parents. This pleasant



scheme of things unfolded as simply as the seasons and was not to be disturbed even for war. She did not understand his bid now for something destined to come later.

But he was trembling a little, and she could not take him lightly.

"I mean it's too soon," she said. "My folks wouldn't let me."

"Don't they like me?"

"It isn't that. They don't even know you."

"I'll talk to them, if you want me to."

"Listen, Andy." She dropped her hands to his arms. She was getting confused. "People don't marry while they're in school. It isn't—civilized. After graduation we plan our—the future."

"But that's just it," he said. "Things aren't that way now, and you can't go by the calendar. There's no future with a war. It goes on and on and you have to make the future while you can. I want a home of my own before I get sucked into it. I've never had parents and a house like this, and it's no good living with my brother and his family any more. Don't you see, Judy? We're old enough already for—for everything. We might as well be together—if you love me."

"I do love you," she said. No one had ever spoken so desperately to her. It squeezed something tender inside her and cut off her wind. "I think you're wonderful, Andy, but——"

"Oh, Judy."

He pulled her roughly to him and kissed her hard on the mouth. His lips were cold at first, but they warmed and burned. In a moment she grew dizzy with the feel of them and turned her face from his with a gasp. She knew she loved him, but she was out of her depth. She felt frightened.

"Will you then?" he said.

"Oh, Andy." She opened her eyes and stared into the bare trees against the street light, her cheek against his shoulder. This was her home. It was a cold winter night, and weddings were for June. She was only a schoolgirl, not a potential bride. Andy was fine and smart and self-sufficient, but hardly a husband. Her father would be angry if she mentioned such a thing to him, and his anger always scared her. She could not tear herself from her parents so abruptly.

"I'll find a little house or apartment to start with," he was saying. "I've got a little money left in the bank from last summer, and a job isn't hard to find nowadays. Please, Judy."

She drew a very deep breath and stood up straight.

"Listen," she said. "Don't talk about it now. Maybe by next summer we can decide. Because you're wrong about the future, Andy. Of course there's one. We're young and the war will get over, and there'll be our whole lives. It's too soon now."

He let go of her and put his hands in his pockets.

"I may not be here after the war," he said.

"Don't say that. Of course you will be."

"Marry me now, Judy."

"I can't. Honestly I can't. You make it so hard."

"Then I'm going to enlist tomorrow."

She suddenly felt cold in her bowels. All at once the war became very imminent. It had been only a vague commotion in the distance, but now she realized that it actually could affect the orderly development of her life.

"Why?" she asked in a whisper.

"Because if you won't marry me there's nothing to keep me in Spokane." His voice sounded guttural, and the blue of his eyes became painfully visible. "Maybe I shouldn't have asked you anyway," he said. "If a man's able to fight maybe it's not fair to put it off. Probably I should've waited till I came back, so forget I asked you." He kissed her quickly and turned down the steps. "Good night, Judy."

For a moment she did not move. She watched his compact figure recede into the light beyond the trees, his overcoat too large for him. He was a completely responsible individual who had put full trust in her, and she had hurt him by refusing to trust him. Now he spoke of offering himself up to a struggle which might very well be the end of him. She could not permit it.

She ran down the steps, cut across the dry lawn to the sidewalk, caught his arm and threw herself against him.

"Don't do that," she said. "Wait till summer, Andy. We don't have to worry about the war yet. I do love you, but it takes time to

arrange anything this important. You've got to wait a little longer."

He held her stiffly, as though she had become someone else.

"I can't wait," he said. "Make it now."

"Let's be engaged now. We don't have to rush."

"But we can't gain anything by waiting. It's too late for that."

"No it's not. The war isn't your business. Let's be engaged."

"That's not enough, Judy."

"It is for now, till—" She choked, and hot tears flooded her eyes. "Oh Andy. We have a right to love each other without hurrying so much."

She broke loose from him and ran with her tears back to the house. He took a step after her, then watched without moving until her white figure reached the porch and went in through the door. But it was too cold to stand still hoping she might come out again and say yes. He turned and began walking fast, wondering if Bony Leeper would go with him.

Because something has to happen now, he thought. And if I get killed, Judy, it won't do either of us any good.

*The billows float in order to the shore,
The wave behind rolls on the wave before . . .*

chapter 1

1

The replacement battalion boarded a convoy of buses in Camp Elliott and was driven down from the hills to San Diego. At the edge of town there were palm trees in front of white stucco houses, and the streets were empty. A little boy stood in his yard with a dog and saluted gravely until the convoy had passed, but that was all the attention it got.

From the dock replacements went aboard ship in single file, alphabetically regardless of rank. It was a large ship and the closest most of them had been to one. Three officers checked each man's record book into a big box, then a Red Cross representative gave each man a kit containing a paper-bound novel, a deck of cards, and a toothbrush. There were no mothers, wives, or sweethearts to say good-by. No band played them off. At 1500 on 16 July 1943 the ship detached itself from the dock and seemed to drift slowly out of the bay on an ebbing tide. It looked as though the land were equally adrift but carried in the opposite direction. For an hour or so beyond the mouth of the harbor a fat blimp circled above them. The blimp lacked any fierceness or dignity suitable

to the occasion, and when it turned back the ship went on alone, pitching gently, heading south by southwest.

"Christ," said Louis F. Bonelli, pfc, USMC. He spit over the fantail and lit a cigarette. "Here we go again."

"You been out before?" asked Bruno K. Leeper, pvt, USMCR.

"Six months at Guantánamo Bay." Bonelli's eyes were the color of a goat's, his khaki fit like a film of grease, and he spoke with a kind of flippant arrogance. "You can bet your sweet life this won't be a six-month tour."

"How long do you figure?" Leeper asked.

"Two years if we're lucky. Maybe three."

"Holy mackerel." Private Leeper stared homeward across the wake of the ship. Bonelli slapped him on the shoulder.

"Cheer up," he said. "Some islands have gooks to shack up with." Leeper grinned a little. "Let's go find a crap game."

Benjamin R. McGhee, 2ndLt, USMCR, stepped aside to let them pass and wondered how old they were. Eighteen, nineteen? He was twenty-three himself and afraid it wasn't enough. Everyone aboard this converted liner seemed too young to know what they were doing. He wondered how old the men in the Trojan horse had been, or the ones at Waterloo. Was it always kids who went out to settle these messes?

He watched the falling land on the horizon. It seemed quite unrelated to his memories of streets and buildings in La Jolla and San Diego and Camp Elliott, but he wanted to see it drop out of sight so he could tell his wife that the world was definitely round. He wanted to remember everything for her and the baby she was going to have—the first moment of being all at sea, the quickened tempo of joining an outfit, the strident climax of tympani on some exotic island, then a homecoming with parades and ribbons. That was the way he pictured his war. He imagined it as lasting two or three months, not two or three years as scuttlebutt had it. He could simply never be gone that long.

The land had grown hazy, and his eyes developed a tendency to water. Ted Kocopy, 2ndLt, USMCR, stood spread-legged beside him.

"Well, fatso," Lt. McGhee said. "When will we see it again?"

Lt. Kocopy was chewing a cigar stub. It further impeded his breathing and speech, which had already been demoralized by a smashed nose. He looked as if he should have cauliflower ears too, but Lt. McGhee liked him because he was so elemental.

"Jeez, Mac," Lt. Kocopy said. "Maybe we'll never see it again."

"Oh hell." He knew Kocopy spoke without thinking, but it had to be denied. "I'll come back. I've got to."

"Yeah," Lt. Kocopy said. "Me too. But for chrissake, a man might swell up and bust with all that stuff inside him and no women around."

"Whoa," McGhee said. "Whoa, boy. We're only two hours out."

"Sure, Mac, sure. I can last today, but what about tomorrow?"

It almost seemed that tomorrow would somehow bring them back to the believable confusions of California, but it did not. The next morning on every side they saw the sea; very blue, very hot, very unvarying. Troops were issued life preservers and herded through an abandon-ship drill, yet no one really believed in the necessity for such things. Empty sky and water presented no threat. In spite of its slow roll and pitch the ship appeared essentially unsinkable, so everyone wandered from one end to the other in search of pastimes. There was only monotony wherever they went. Gradually heat and lazy motion drained them of any desire to move, then they sprawled on the decks and began to hate the voyage. They had been trained hard, but now there was no use for the training. Life slid to a sodden standstill.

Lt. McGhee wondered why he did not like the ocean. Books said it was a thing of great beauty and inspiration, but it did not appeal to him. He stared at the horizon until he was groggy and could not even tell if the ship made headway. There was no break in this monotony of sky and water, no fixed point for the eye, and he had come from Montana where the air had real clarity and mountains broke skyward almost everywhere. He felt sheepish about disliking the sea, so before noon he went to the ship's library and got copies of Conrad and Melville to read in his quarters.

He shared with Lt. Kocopy and seven other officers a stateroom

that had served two passengers in peacetime. On the bunk below his lay Jack (n) Coble, 2ndLt, USMCR. In camp he had been a bullheaded athlete with a domineering sneer, but now he was seasick. He rolled around in his shorts and retched periodically into a towel which easily received the frothy content of his stomach now that the bulk of it was gone. The constant rise and fall of the ship bled away his strength in a tenuous hemorrhage of vitality between convulsions of retching, but nobody felt sorry for him. Lt. Kocopy bent over his bunk and blew cigar smoke in his face.

"Whatsa matter, Jack?" he asked. "Aren't you hungry for some of them nice greasy pork chops in the wardroom?"

"You bastard." Lt. Coble reached for his towel, and Kocopy roared.

At night the ship was blacked out on deck, and you could see phosphorescence in the water and thousands of stars in the sky. You could hear a faint hiss from the bow cutting the waves, and from time to time a cable rattled in the rigging. Corporal Klein sat on a bitt in the bow, wishing he could smoke a cigarette without having to go below to the hot black hold where a strip of canvas held his gear without leaving much room for him. It was hot topside too, but not so bad as down there where men were stacked one above the other like bolts of drygoods in an airtight warehouse. They had water hours for drinking and filling their canteens, and nothing but salt water to shave and shower with. They ate in a mess hall which became incredibly dirty, stifling, stinking, and slippery with grease during meals. Ate, that is, if they could stomach the beans and sorghum for breakfast, boiled eggs for lunch, and horsecrack for supper. Corporal Klein thought a cigarette might cut his appetite, but mostly he just longed to be off this ship.

"You know, Emil," he said at last. Private Fischer was stretched out on the deck at his feet. "There are a lot of boys on this bucket who'll never see one going the other way."

"Yeah," said Private Fischer. "Lots of one-way tickets."

"They all think they'll come back, though. Only I don't."

"Why not?"

"I dunno." Corporal Klein stared at the stars and thought about

light-years and infinity. "Maybe because right now it seems like there's nothing to come back to. We're too insignificant. It's like we've already been sorted out and shipped off into the void."

"That's a mood," Emil Fischer said. "Or is it a premonition?"

"I'm not superstitious. But I can't imagine coming back over this route two or three years from now. I don't even particularly want to."

"You should've married the gal."

"That wouldn't've helped. A man without a future has no right to take on responsibilities. What if I really don't come back?"

"It's the chance you take, Lennie."

"But what if she'd had my child?"

"You'd be immortal. That's the way you do it—through children."

"Oh for god's sake."

"Well, what the hell, Lennie."

"I mean how would she have made out, with my kid and all?"

"It doesn't take a war to make a widow."

"Be serious once."

"I am serious. No matter how you get dead you can't be responsible for the living afterwards. You've had it. It's up to them to carry on."

"But maybe it's not right to make children in this kind of a world."

"Oh crap. Haven't you enjoyed living so far?"

"Anyway, this way I'm already dead as far as she's concerned. She can find a better man and have a happy life without waiting for me."

"Okay. So you fixed it up the way you want it. So forget it."

"Well. I did love her though." The stars swung around as the ship changed course. You could see the Big Dipper low in the north.

"Where we going?" Private Fischer asked after a while.

"I dunno. New Caledonia, maybe. Maybe Australia."

"I mean where will we go from there, to fight?"

"Who cares?" Corporal Klein smiled, because it did not worry

um. "One island's as good as another to leave your bones on."

The days grew hotter and more monotonous, and there was no relief. The troop executive officer ordered regular calisthenics for all hands, but hardly anyone appreciated his order except Sergeant Carlton V. Barnard, USMC. He had been in the Marine Corps for nine years and swore he had never seen such lax discipline. He also said he felt logy and headache without exercise, so he volunteered to drill his company. Other NCOs supervised their groups by giving the count but not setting the example, because heat kept you sweating even when you sat still. Strenuous exertion was a form of torture, yet Sergeant Barnard jumped and squatted and pushed up along with his men on the after boat deck, his huge chest bare and not so much muscular as big-boned and thick-hided. The men detested him for his effort.

Then replacement doctors called a short-arm inspection. They decided it was a fine opportunity to treat cases of venereal disease without having their work immediately undone by reinfection, so enlisted men filed past corpsmen in helpless obedience to display their privates in public like cattle being judged. Clay R. Gosse, pfc, USMCR, resented this order more than he did the calisthenics. He had a fresh dose of clap and believed it was nobody's business but his own.

"Them chancre mechanics don't hafta go through this rigma-role," he told Private Flynn. He had a Southern accent that made him sound as if his mouth were crippled. His skin was fine-grained and seemed too tight for his face and body. He looked solid and flawless but somehow vicious, as though that tight skin irritated his inner layers and made him want to hurt others because of his own discomfort. "They'd rather look at the boys than ask if you got it. To hell with that noise."

Maynard Flynn was embarrassed. He was a virgin and did not understand what the fuss was all about. Clay Gosse had persuaded him to hide out, yet he knew authority would catch up with them sooner or later.

"You'd think a guy'd tell 'em if he had anything wrong," he said.

"Then they put it in your record book. Then you're screwed."

"But what if a guy just got it off a toilet seat?"

"Then he oughta have his head examined."

They were sitting in the shade of a life raft when the Sergeant of the Guard found them, and five minutes later Gosse's case was diagnosed. The doctors began treating a baker's dozen of infections like his, but the main result of the inspection was to emphasize a sense of gross frustration throughout the ship. That parade of specific male parts without present validity reminded everyone of missing female parts. It was impossible to ignore a high-handed need with rules of its own.

Yet it's more than physical, Benjamin McGhee thought as he sweltered in his bunk that night beneath Lt. Kocopy and above Lt. Coble. Because I loved her before I ever touched her, and with a baby coming we're in another phase altogether. It's a knowledge you share too, beyond flesh. . . .

"Say, Mac," Lt. Kocopy said in a nasal whisper. He had been tossing and turning for an hour, every move communicated to the bunks below.

"Go to sleep," Lt. McGhee said. It was too dark to see Kocopy's battered nose hanging over the edge of his bunk a foot away.

"I can't sleep, for chrissake. Listen, Mac. Did you ever go to bed with two dames at once?"

"Cut it out, Ted. Swell up and bust by yourself."

"No, hey. Didn't you ever try it for kicks?"

"I'm a one-woman man."

"Oh hell. But what I wanted to tell you is that the night before we shipped out of Dago I wound up in bed between two queens. They were roommates I dated by turns, and we celebrated together. But listen. We drank so much I'm not sure now whether I made either one."

"Knock it off, you horny bastard," Lt. Coble said.

"Blow it, Jack." Lt. Kocopy settled back. "I just wish I knew."

Then the days had no meaning. They were unendurable periods to be endured, as if the ship had become senselessly stuck in a mass of liquid salt sweated from the earth by an all-powerful sun. The voyage began to seem as endless as an olden voyage on a

sailing vessel, and life itself became meaningless. It had neither source nor goal. If you thought of home, it was hard to remember. If you thought of getting off the ship, it was hard to imagine. But if you tried not thinking at all, you could almost accept the stupefying heat and soggy tropical substance called air.

"Anyhow it's downhill now, Mac," Lt. Kocopy said when the ship's loud-speakers announced that they were crossing the equator. He flicked cigar ashes toward flying fish skimming over the water, then outlined a globe in the air with his hands and indicated its southern slope. "See. We coast from here on." Lt. McGhee looked straight ahead, and Lt. Kocopy made feminine curves in the air. "I only hope we coast fast."

And then one day there was no day. The ship crossed the international date line, and it was twenty-four hours later. A whole monotonous day dropped out of their lives without a trace, as if to prove their growing vulnerability. With the certainty of time becoming uncertain, what chance had mere flesh and blood?

2

On the day that skipped a day, Andrew (n) Willy, pvt, USMCR, stood guard at the starboard side of the forward boat deck. He did not know exactly what he was guarding, but he had every intention of guarding it well. The Corporal of the Guard had given him some word about making a general lookout and barring enlisted men from officers' country, but for the most part he could not tell an officer from anyone else. Regardless of rank, all hands were stripped to the waist and oozing the same heavy sweat. Nobody wasted energy on useless movement. Few people came up the ladder in front of him, and those who did were obviously on duty and could be passed unchallenged.

His post was in the sun. He had been standing there for three hours already. Drops of sweat ran down his sternum and tickled like flies, but they no longer made him twitch. His steel helmet and slung carbine no longer had any special weight. His hips no longer felt the cut of a web cartridge belt with first-aid packet, clip car-

rier, and two canteens full of water that he could not drink. He was not even conscious of the hot khaki uniform clinging to his body like a wet mold. Total discomfort was greater than any one detail, and irritation would have been futile in the face of something inevitable.

He just stood there with a feeling of wonder, as though his brain had been steamed by the sun on his helmet into a soft jelly with little bubbles of wonder caught in it like bubbles of nuclear organs in protoplasm. Where was this ship taking them, if any place, and what would he do when he got there, if anything? How soon would they find out that he was not really a marine but only Andrew Willy playing hooky from himself? And if they ever did get into combat, would he somehow know—by revelation perhaps—all the things that everyone else seemed to know already? Yet more than likely combat in the Pacific was a myth. If a bomb landed right now on the decks below, it would surely go limp and fizzle out like every other high deadly purpose in this oppressive heat.

Private Willy moved his left foot a quarter of an inch from his right foot. It was the extreme of willed activity but proved him for the moment still separate from sea and sea air—different concentrations of the same substance, both blue, hot, and cloying. Water appeared elastically undulant instead of moist or fluid. It did not seem limitless but rather terribly finite, as though the sky pressed down and fused with it at the edges to seal off a suffocating ball turret within which the ship teetered slowly up and down. There was no demonstrable proof of forward motion. For all he knew they had been teetering up and down in exactly this same spot for two weeks and would keep on until everything dissolved into one thick spermatic blob.

A three-way osmosis of three miscible solutions—sea, air, and Andrew Willy—did seem to be taking place. His jellied mind perceptibly rose and fell with each pitch and roll of the ship. And he was growing steadily more dazed, uneasy, and sick to his stomach. He wondered if he would be able to stand out his last hour of guard or whether he would fall insensible to the deck and be carted away ingloriously to the brig. Would it matter in either case?

He closed his eyes. His eyelids flamed against his eyeballs. He opened his eyes and saw the forward decks. Men lay everywhere on the hatch covers and along the rails and around the winches, naked to the waist and with their pants legs rolled up. He wondered if mere sweating any longer satisfied the soulless urge of sun and sea to create life, or whether these unused male bodies had begun to ooze semen through their pores. So much inactive bull strength seemed incapable of oozing anything else by now, but what good did it do the malignant mother sea? Private Willy himself felt as primordial as one minute spermatozoa, subservient to blind accident and forced to seek fulfillment of some sort. Seek or perish; seek and perish. . . .

A voice seemed to speak from somewhere outside him.

"Report your post."

But this had no meaning. His eyes focused above number three hatch where a suspended crate swayed on a single line from the boom. On the side of the crate was a stencil, and he wondered where he had seen it before. Epic 83-A it said. Then he remembered that this stencil also appeared on his sea bag. It was his destination in code. Epic 83-A. It sounded fine, except that epics were something Greek and ancient and you could not belong to one with a carbine instead of a sword. Of course a bayonet was a sort of sword, and maybe code-makers knew the significance of the names they picked. Maybe epics always seemed strange to the men involved—only by looking back would it make sense.

He heard this voice again near him.

"I said report your post, lad."

He could not think what that might mean, so he let his gaze drop to the working party around an open hatch below the crate. He could not understand how anyone found the necessity to shift cargo at this point in space and time, yet men were doing it. Then his gaze drifted closer in, and just below him he recognized Bony Leeper crouched on the deck like a dog in heat. Bony Leeper was a link with the past, but not a very satisfactory link. His passion for poker and crap games kept him with other guys most of the time, except when he wanted to borrow money. He had a fistful of

bills now and was waiting for Louie Bonelli to roll out the dice as if the results were going to be momentous.

Then another voice spoke sharply beside him.

"Willy! Report your post to the Officer of the Day."

He finally realized that he had been spoken to. He stiffened to rigid attention and turned his head. He saw a pair of gold bars on the collar of a khaki shirt. In his little private life officers brought only trouble, and he felt dismayed as he raised his eyes to Lt. Coble's flushed face. He saw a scar like a cleat mark on the lieutenant's left cheek. He also saw the Sergeant of the Guard and Corporal of the Guard behind the lieutenant. Private Willy wondered what he had done now.

"Knock off the daydreaming and report your post!" Lt. Coble said.

He did not know what the lieutenant meant. He did not seem to know what anything meant any more. He was standing where he had been told to stand and doing what he had been told to do, yet here came three angry superiors to shout at him. It had been pretty much that way ever since he entered boot camp five months ago. He wanted to be a good marine, but some little thing always went wrong.

"What's the matter?" Lt. Coble said. "Can't you talk?"

"Yessir," Private Willy said.

"Then for god's sake report your post."

He had heard that Lt. Coble got seasick the first day out, but you would never guess it now. The lieutenant was big, tough, and sure of himself. Private Willy wished he could look and act like that.

"Nothing to report, sir," he said at last.

This did not seem to be the right answer. Lt. Coble put his hands on his hips and narrowed his eyes. The fingers of his right hand drummed the leather holster of his .45.

"What's your tenth General Order?" he asked.

Private Willy thought about it. Back in boot camp there had been General Orders. They were pledges for a sentry on post, and back there they had seemed the essence of duty to your country.

But here in the middle of the Pacific Ocean how did they apply? Then the first one slipped into his head. "To take charge of this post and all government property in view." There were eleven of them; they all started with "To . . ."

"To . . ." Private Willy said, but could not remember the tenth one.

"Go on," Lt. Coble said. His face was getting redder.

"To . . ." Private Willy began again, and could go no farther.

"All right," Lt. Coble said. "What's your special orders?"

Private Willy looked beyond the lieutenant for help from Sergeant Barnard or Corporal Klein. They both scowled at him.

"I don't know, sir," Private Willy said. He thought Lt. Coble would strike him. He had not believed there could be such passion in this heat. The lieutenant's voice sounded very loud.

"Don't you have any idea why you're here?"

"Well, sir, to keep enlisted men out," Private Willy told him.

"Anything else?" Lt. Coble asked more quietly.

A faint scorching wind burned Private Willy's cheeks. He made an honest effort to concentrate but could think of nothing else.

"Jesus," Lt. Coble said. He waved his hand toward the undulant blue water. "If you saw a Jap submarine wouldn't you do anything?"

"Yessir."

"Well, what?" Private Willy wondered what indeed? He could not fire his carbine at it because he had no ammunition. He said nothing. Finally Lt. Coble turned furiously to the Sergeant of the Guard. "Did this man receive any special instructions?"

"Yessir," Sgt. Barnard said. He turned to the Corporal of the Guard. "Isn't that right, Corporal?"

"Yessir," Cpl. Klein said positively.

"Then he'd better be relieved," Lt. Coble told them. He turned again to Private Willy. "You're a sad sack of crap to wear that uniform. If you haven't the sense to report an enemy sub, you haven't the sense to be depended on when a line of men hits the beach. I'd hate to have you in my outfit once we get ashore, and I'd have you court-martialed for dopping off right now if I thought

I'd ever see you again." He swung around to Sgt. Barnard. "Send him down to help the working party in number three hold. Maybe he's at least fit for rear echelon work."

Private Willy climbed clear to the bottom of number three hold. It was suffocating down there among stacks of crates all stenciled Epic 83-A. The working party was shifting starboard crates to the port, and port crates to the starboard. He joined them full of shame for himself. The sheer weight of Marine Corps routine was bound to crush him long before any battle took place, and he had intended to be so good—to become a corporal, a sergeant, a hero for his country and Judy. Yet he was too much like his brothers Lloyd and Ralph to be fit for an epic.

But there in the hold he did remember his tenth General Order, and no wonder Lt. Coble had been mad: "To salute all officers . . ."

3

Hills above Wellington were fog-streaked and green in the winter sun of August. New Zealand was more peaceful than California, as if they had traveled for a month away from war instead of toward it. And going ashore on foreign soil for the first time was rather like going ashore around the corner from where they went aboard, until they rode out of town to camp.

Then it began to seem very strange to join a unit from Guadalcanal. This Second Marine Division had been there, and Guadalcanal was already a legend—Epic 82-Q? You could not casually mingle with men of a real epic, yet you were expected to.

Three truckloads of replacements went to the Fourth Battalion of the Second Regiment and stopped in front of an adjutant's office, which looked like a root cellar. It was in a little valley with steep hills on three sides, and there were a few other huts and a great many pyramidal tents. Rain clouds had gathered over the valley, and the camp was cold and deserted. A duty officer told them the battalion was on liberty. He broke the men into groups for company assignment.

Private Willy's name was called in a list that included Bonelli, Fischer, Flynn, Gosse, Klein, Leeper, and Sgt. Barnard. He picked up his sea bag to go with them and stumbled over an officer's foot locker. Someone caught his arm to keep him from falling.

"Well, wouldn't you know it?" Lt. Coble said. Private Willy saluted awkwardly, staring at the lieutenant's cleat-mark scar. "The runt of the litter, with two left feet yet. Keerist."

"Easy, Jack," Lt. McGhee said. "He didn't see your locker."

"But why do we get the bottom of the barrel?"

Lt. Kocopy shifted the cigar stub in his mouth.

"Maybe we're the bottom of the barrel too," he said. He slapped Lt. Coble on the back and snorted. Lt. Coble turned away in disgust.

A fine drizzle of rain began as Private Willy caught up to his group among the tents. In front of a company office they waited for assignment to quarters, and a couple of men came to the entrance of the opposite tent to watch these newcomers. The men inside were thin and pale and had malaria. Private Willy looked down at his feet and suddenly felt alien to the core in the presence of Guadalcanal veterans who were still sick from it. He was in a foreign country all right, without any apparent qualification for being there.

Clay Gosse and Maynard Flynn were assigned to a tent with him. He did not mind being separated from Bony Leeper now that civilian friendships were growing as obsolete as civilian life. The tent was dark and empty except for three cots made up around boxes used as tables and shelves. Gosse began shoving the cots together to make room for new ones. Flynn helped, but Willy stood inside the entrance with his sea bag on his shoulder and folded cot leaning against his leg.

"Hadn't we better wait?" he asked.

"Wait for what?" Gosse said. "Christmas?"

"I mean the old fellows, before we monkey with their gear."

"Christ. They're ashore till noon tomorrow. Let's get squared away and go see if these gook women put out."

He said gook as he might say nigger in that crippled-mouth

accent. His fine-grained skin was beautifully tanned from a month in the sun, but he rubbed you the wrong way.

"Haven't you spent enough time in the clap shack?" Willy said.

Gosse stood up and went very red.

"I don't take that from no half-pint pogeys," he said.

"Watch what you call me," Willy told him, dropping his sea bag.

"Aw, knock it off, fellows." Flynn moved between them, clean-cut and gangly. "You might as well be buddies in the same tent. At least let's go look the place over, Willy."

"I didn't come ten thousand miles to go sight-seeing," Willy said.

"Why did you come?" Gosse asked. "You'll never kill a Jap."

"I'll kill as many as you when it's time."

"You won't have a chance." Gosse sneered. "You'll be safe in some rear echelon with the rest of the women and kids." He bent to finish with his cot. "Hurry up, Flynn. Let's get outta here."

When they went to see the first sergeant, Private Willy sat alone on his new bunk and listened to the rain. Its patter was sad and steady on the tent, but he did not know why he should feel homesick since home meant only Lloyd's house. In a way it meant Judy too, yet he could not think of her clearly. She was in Spokane, and he was in the Antipodes, and what was the point of it when they hated him for trying—the tough ones like Lt. Coble and Clay Gosse.

He got cold and went to the tin stove in the center of the tent and started a few chips of wood burning. He added a few round lumps of coal, then straightened the belongings of the tent's original occupants. He touched their rifles as though they were historic relics. These weapons had killed Japs on Guadalcanal, yet it was hard for him to imagine. Maybe his attempt to reach jungles and violence had been a big mistake.

He heard someone on the tent steps and quickly put the last rifle back in place. He turned to meet someone important, but it was only Gosse and Flynn returning. He was almost glad to see them. Gosse had a bottle of Waitemata beer in his hand, and Flynn had two of them.

"What's the scoop?" Willy asked. Gosse crossed to his bunk,

cussing the first sergeant for refusing to let them out of camp.

"A replacement gets spit on," he said. "Anyhow liberty's every sixth day. We won't have to wait too long."

"I brought you a beer," Flynn said. He handed Willy the bottle. He was very nice, almost too nice for a marine.

"Where'd you get it?" Willy asked.

"At a slop chute. You owe me two and six."

"What's that?"

"Gook money." Flynn grinned. "Two shillings, six pence."

"No kiddin'. What's it worth in American?"

"Two bits, I guess. You can pay me later, Willy."

The beer tasted flat and did not have much effect. It rained all afternoon, and when they heard evening chow call they took their mess gear and followed other men to the company mess hall. Bony Leeper waved Willy into line, and he ate with Leeper and Bonelli at a wooden table where there were a couple of veterans who had returned from liberty. The veterans were disappointing. They seemed too young and talkative to have suffered in combat, and the only thing Bonelli talked to them about was women. Everyone except Flynn talked of women as though the sole aim of the Marine Corps was incessant and indiscriminate copulation.

"Let's go," Willy said to Leeper after half an hour of it.

"Okay, Andy," Leeper said. "Come on over to our tent a while."

It was already dark outside, but the rain had stopped. They lit a lamp in Leeper's tent and sat down on opposite sides of the stove. It was warm inside but hardly cheerful. Leeper looked forlorn. He imitated Bonelli a lot but never made arrogance stick. Willy knew him too well anyway. Leeper was no real marine either.

"God, Bony," Willy said. "Are you sorry we did it?"

"Nah." Leeper gave a Bonelli shrug. "I had a good time state-side."

"How do you think we'll make out now?"

"Liberty sounds good. But they say it's a rough outfit."

"Doesn't seem like we learned enough in boot camp, does it?"

"Don't worry. They'll teach us the rest."

"How soon though?"

"Soon enough, for god's sake. What do you want?"

"Well, what the hell. I mean I don't want to be an eager beaver, but when guys are in there pitchin' on New Georgia it doesn't seem like we should poop around New Zealand with a six-day week and women and all."

"Relax, Andy. Relax. Have fun while you can."

"I'd rather get it over with and have fun at home."

"Who says you'll ever get home?"

They heard someone at the entrance and thought it was Bonelli. A stranger stuck his head through the flaps. Willy stood up as if he were snapping to attention for an officer, but when the stranger came on in it was only an enlisted man in dirty dungarees. He looked at them blankly.

"Hi," he said. "Where the hell did you come from?"

Leeper tried to imitate Bonelli's confidence.

"We just got here," he said. "I been assigned to this tent."

The stranger smiled and held out his hand.

"Goodo. They call me Chick Woodruff."

He was the most disappointing one yet. When Willy shook his hand he thought Lt. Coble did not know what the bottom of the barrel was. Woodruff had two front teeth missing, sallow skin, and no beard. He was salty, he was a veteran, but was so young that his voice still broke.

"Jesus," he said. "With you bastards we'll be up to strength, and next they'll want us to fight some more."

"Any scuttlebutt about it?" Leeper asked.

"Who needs scuttlebutt with a flock of replacements?" He hitched up his pants by his hands in his pockets. "Keerist, the honeymoon's over."

"Been training hard?" Willy asked, and his voice sounded prim.

"Startin' to," Woodruff said. "Any officers with you guys?"

"Three," Willy told him, forcing his voice lower.

"Then we're in for it. A marine gunner had the platoon, a swell guy. But them buck-ass second looies always want to make points and screw everybody. Say. What's it like back in the states now?"

Willy and Leeper looked at each other, and Willy wondered if

you could be gone from the states so long that they became a quaint land in your past. Before he or Leeper thought of anything to say, Bonelli flipped back the tent flaps and came blinking into the light. His arrogance was not really offensive because it was only a sort of sexual swagger. It suited him. He went straight to Woodruff and introduced himself as though he were the veteran.

"Hope you didn't mind us movin' your stuff," he said as he hung up his mess gear. "Didn't think you'd be back tonight."

"Fair dinkum," Chick said. "Glad you built a fire. I been at the machine-gun company all day in a poker game. Won a quid."

"How come you're not on liberty?"

"In hack for two weeks." Chick laughed and swore. "Got in a knife fight with a couple of poge-bait Sixths, and the MPs turned me in. Got to report to the OD every hour." He swore again, and Bonelli laughed.

"What's the poge-bait Sixth?" Leeper asked.

"You know," Chick said. "Sixth Marines. No-good outfit that wears them *fourragères* and come in on the 'Canal after it was secure. The suckers are always after trouble when they got you outnumbered." He paced restlessly around the center of the tent, his hands in his pockets. "I bet them two I tangled with won't pull nothin' no more."

"They knock your teeth out?" Bonelli asked. Chick grinned.

"Nah, I ain't had those since I was a pup. Lost my bridge on Tulagi."

"Pretty rough on Tulagi?" Willy said.

"Oh brother."

But he did not explain it any more than that. The 'Canal was six months behind him, and maybe he had forgotten it somehow. Bonelli and Leeper gave him no encouragement, so you almost felt that combat was a mystery to be ignored, like religion. Bonelli stretched out on his sack comfortably.

"You poor bastards," he said. "You sure as hell missed out on a lot of shag time while you were messin' around them islands."

"Oh man." Chick threw his head back and hitched his pants chest high. "You can say that again." Then he straightened up

suddenly and turned to Bonelli. "Say. You wanna go on a party tonight?"

"First sergeant says no liberty."

"They ain't gonna make bed check. Ain't I in hack?"

"Yeah." Bonelli sat up with interest. "Keep talkin', mate."

"Well, my wife lives with her folks up to Otaki," Chick said.

"Your wife?" Willy asked. Chick grinned wider than ever.

"You bet. I got married just before I got in hack."

"For chrissake," Bonelli said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks. I ain't got no more cigars, but I'll getcha some." Chick was ugly, yet his toothless smile made you like him. "Anyhow, about this here party. It's my birthday, so a bunch of my coppers is throwin' a whing-ding at my in-laws. These gooks are fine people."

"How old are you?" Willy asked. Chick frowned at him.

"Don't tell no one," he said. "I hadda lie about my age when I enlisted two years ago. I'm seventeen today, nineteen for the record."

"For chrissake," Bonelli said.

"That's why they call me Chick, because I was the youngest guy in the company. Nearly everybody else is nineteen, except for a few old birds in their twenties. The major's oldest. He's damn near thirty."

"I can vote," Bonelli said. "Maybe Willy's the chick now."

"I'm half a year older than Woodruff," Willy said.

"Well, anyhow." Chick hitched up his pants once more and hunched his shoulders in anticipation. "I got a ride all set. The company jeep driver's my clobber, and he's goin' after the captain later on."

"Is there room for all of us?" Bonelli asked.

"Sure. Get acquainted with the boys. Plenty of liquor."

"Well kiss my patootie." Bonelli reached under his sack for his sea bag. "Go get your greens, Willy. We found a real buddy."

He did not want to end up in a knife fight or the brig. Lt. Coble would be trouble enough as it was. But they said you were not a marine until you had made the brig or the clap shack, and maybe

they were right. Maybe you went just as far by following the wise-acres, and if you got good and drunk regularly maybe you would develop lines in your face that looked like sustained living. Leeper was not hesitating, so Willy went to his own tent and dug rumpled greens from his sea bag. He pressed them in the recreation hut after Bonelli and Leeper finished with the iron, then they all sat in Chick's tent waiting for taps.

In San Diego Willy used to hold his breath when taps went. Its sadness was acute any time, but caught between dark hills here in New Zealand it sounded cruelly sad. He had never been so conscious of sorrow and loneliness in it and could not help thinking of cemeteries on Guadalcanal and the enormity of not living. He did not know how the field music held its notes without choking, or how veterans like Chick heard it without tears. Not even Bonelli looked at Chick as he got up to put the light out and leave the tent, and after the bugle had died away you could still feel it, like expanding emptiness. Willy thought everyone must have lost the desire to go to a party.

But when Chick came back from checking in at the guard tent for the last time that day, he was more excited than ever. He changed into greens quickly and led the other three up a wet hillside behind camp in order to avoid a roving sentry. Then they circled down to the road and waited in a clump of bushes for the jeep. The night was moonless and dark. Willy huddled against Leeper for warmth, remembering the tropical heat and peculiar security of shipboard limitations. Finally a motor started in camp, then lights approached. A jeep stopped.

"Get in," Chick told them. "We're late now."

"Hold on," the driver said. "This ain't no liberty bus, Chick."

"Don't be a sorehead," Chick said. "They're my new cobbbers."

"Not mine. I should get my ass in a sling for replacements?"

"Aw come on, Rusty. Before the sentry gets nosy."

"Well Jesus Christ. Pile in then. But dammit all, Chick."

They drove off fast down the road. They drove on the left-hand side and it made you nervous, but there was no traffic. When they reached a paved highway the driver began to loosen up. He kept

telling the new men where they were and that the railroad tracks beside them were real gook narrow gauge, but it was so dark beyond the headlights that the whole ride was a cold blank rush making you wonder how much effort could be put into going AWOL. When they stopped at a farmhouse just off the highway it seemed too late to do anything but go back to camp, yet the party inside sounded as though nobody had ever heard of reveille roll call. The driver went in with them to have one drink.

The house reminded Willy of his brother Ralph's old farm in Hanford, Washington, except that it was larger and noisier. There was a middle-aged couple sitting in easy chairs beside an electric heater, and there were a lot of girls dancing with a lot of marines. Chick's wife rushed into his arms as soon as he stepped in the door. The rest of the party stopped dancing to cheer. A marine was playing an upright piano, and when he saw Chick he began to play Happy Birthday. Everyone sang and then crowded around Chick and his wife. It began to look as if joining a combat outfit was more fun than any part of the preparation.

Willy tried to be inconspicuous against the wall beside Leeper until Chick brought his wife over and introduced her. She was homely and red-cheeked but very nice. She took Willy and Leeper to meet her parents. The old man offered them beer, then the mother asked about their trip out and their first impressions of New Zealand. Her accent bothered Willy, but when he understood what she said he liked the lilt of it. She was a fat comfortable woman, and he would have liked to stay there talking to her, but marines began to come over to say hello. They were all slightly drunk, and after the first two had said they were glad to have him aboard Willy realized that they were not going to question his ability. These veterans were more relaxed than stateside marines, and they were more interested in getting him drunk than in baiting him.

"Have a shot, matie," a tall pfc said in a hybrid accent. "Now chase it with your beer, matie. Cheers, pip-pip, and all that."

"We're awfully sorry to be so far ahead of you," his New Zealand girl told Willy. "But you mustn't feel left out at all, you know."

"Nobody's left out in New Zealand," the pfc said. "Right, sugar?"

"Right, yank. Let your mate hold the bottle, and jazz me again."

They danced off into the crowd, and then Willy saw a buck sergeant with a sleepy smile standing in front of him. The sergeant's hair was about a quarter of an inch long all over his head. He wore a tailored shirt that showed his narrow waist, broad shoulders, and thick biceps. Slowly he put out his hand and felt Willy's cheek with the back of it.

"Oh Jesus," he said. "The fresh meat they send out. It makes you puke to think what the sonsabitches want done with it. Have a drink, baby."

"I'm drinking too fast now, Sergeant," Willy said.

"Skip the sergeant. Call me Fritz till we get in camp." He had a full tumbler of whisky in each hand. "Here. Don't hurt my feelings."

The room already looked fuzzy, but Willy set his beer down and took one of the whisky glasses. He had never met a sergeant socially before.

"Cheers," he said and drank a little. "What's your outfit?"

"Decontamination squad," the sergeant said. "I was a line corporal on the 'Canal, but I finagled. Want to get in my chemical unit, baby?"

"Oh, I'd sort of like to see how the line is."

"God. Don't try to be noble. Combat's depraved, baby. It's filthy. It's so rotten filthy it makes the stuff in sewers smell sweet. It's so nasty dirty that when you get mixed up in it you begin to feel like a soft brown smear of it right under your own nose. It's the dirtiest thing men have thought of yet, except maybe what Germans do to Jews. It makes you want to go over the hill from the whole human race, except that masturbation might get monotonous."

The sergeant was drunk, but he knew what he was saying. He said it gently with that sleepy smile, yet his eyes were hard and wide-awake. Apparently he had a complete knowledge of evil, and Willy felt drunker by being so close to it. He took another drink

of the sergeant's whisky, still holding the bottle for the pfc who was dancing.

"But look at these guys," he said. "Why shouldn't I go through it if they did? You came out all right, Sergeant."

"Fritz. Fritz Potter. But it isn't finished yet, baby."

"No, but I guess it's my turn as much as anyone's."

The sergeant took a long drink, watching Willy over the glass.

"You're okay, baby," he said. "Built like a scaled-down quarterback, but god damn I hate to see good specimens get all ripped up and diseased before they get well used." Then he turned toward the dancing couples. "Want a woman? Your cobber's jazzing the one I brought, but I'll get her for you."

He pointed to Bonelli dancing tightly with a pretty girl in a white sweater. Leeper was also dancing with someone, but Willy held back.

"Better watch out for Bonelli," he said. The sergeant shrugged.

"If you don't want her, let him have a go. It's everybody's war."

Then beer and whisky got the best of Willy. He lost track of individuals and sequences in a loud hazy glow. At some point Chick's mother-in-law passed around big thick sandwiches, and after the piano player got tired of playing a group of men sat on the floor to sing songs. Willy learned one he thought was especially funny.

They sent for the Army to come to Tulagi,

But Douglas MacArthur said, "No!"

He said, "There's a reason—it isn't the season;

Besides, there is no U.S.O."

And then it was very late and the girls had all gone and a truck was taking the marines back to camp before reveille. They got out of the truck at the edge of camp and straggled up the dark hillside to avoid the sentry. It was wet and slippery and terraced where cattle grazed, but whenever Willy fell someone picked him up. Then he bumped into a cow. He had not smelled a cow for years, but it seemed awfully reassuring. He put his cheek against her warm flank and giggled.

"Knock it off," someone whispered in the darkness near him.

"Listen," he said. A hand found his mouth and shut off his giggles. He held onto the cow and controlled his crazy glee enough to get his lips free of the hand. "Listen a minute," he said. "I just want to tell you I can do it, honest I can. I'll show Coble and Gosse and the whole shootin'-match, because listen, fellows . . ."

"Shut up, baby," another voice said softly.

They dragged him away from the cow with two hands covering his mouth, but they did not know which tent was his and he could not tell them, so he spent the hour before reveille in the head being sick.

4

The major wore clean dungarees with no insignia. He was lean and mild, but when the light was right you could see both his temples moving steadily as he chewed on his back teeth. He seldom smiled and appeared preoccupied, yet he was always pleasant.

"I suppose all three of you want a line platoon?" he said to the new lieutenants sitting in his office. They said yessir together. He studied each of them closely. "For once we've got too many lieutenants," he told them then. "The gunner's platoon is the only one without a TO leader. You won't have a hell of a lot of time with it, because whoever takes it will have to run this whole new bunch through range firing." He studied them each again, his temples moving. "Unfortunately I don't know any of you from Adam. Your records are identical, as far as they go. It's a good platoon with a few Silver Stars. Who gets it?"

"Give it to me, sir," Lt. Coble said. "I'm a line man."

"I'd very much like to have it," Lt. McGhee said. The major looked on around to Lt. Kocopy. Kocopy grinned and nodded, breathing audibly.

"I'm here to play ball, Major."

"It's not a ball game," the major said. "I've seen good athletes crack up because there aren't any rules to it." He sat back and went over them one by one again as if field stripping them men-

tally and finding the parts interchangeable. "Match for it then. Odd man gets it."

The three lieutenants stood up and fished coins from their pockets. They flipped them on the major's desk and put their hands over them until all three coins were down. Uncovered each coin showed heads.

"Again," the major said.

They flipped again, covered, and uncovered together. Lt. Coble still had heads. The other two had tails.

"Satisfied?" the major said. Lt. Coble nodded, and the other two shrugged as they picked up their coins. The major looked tired. "Don't cry. Old platoon leaders will come down with malaria, and you'll have to fill in. Meanwhile, McGhee, you work with the adjutant. He's got a lot of nasty details. Kocopy can take over recreation and malaria control for Bn-4. If you don't like this—we won't be overstrength for long." He smiled a flat smile of dismissal. "Good luck."

The three lieutenants went outside. It was raining again, and they stopped to put on their ponchos.

"Let me have the platoon, Jack," McGhee said when his head came through.

"Not on your life," Coble told him. "It was a fair toss."

"That doesn't make it sacred. Please, Jack."

"What the hell do you think I am?"

"Come on, Mac," Kocopy said. "If I'm recreation officer I'll requisition you two women a night. Coble can beat the bushes for it."

Lt. McGhee spent all afternoon with the adjutant and heard how hard it was to keep accurate records in the jungles. He did not doubt it, but he did not care. At quitting time he went back to the hut he shared with the other new officers. From the road beyond the laundry shed there was the sound of men doing close-order drill. He listened as Lt. Coble ordered the detail to halt. Coble's voice was a boot-camp snarl.

"Goddammit," he said. "You people look worse than Army recruits. The whole outfit stays here till chow goes unless you snap

out of your hockey. Now Willy, you'll get EPD till hell freezes over if . . ."

Lt. McGhee opened the door and went inside. There were three cots in a row along one wall, and a kerosene heater put out a little heat and quite a bit of smoke. Lt. Kocopy was buttoning the blouse of his greens. He looked handsome in greens, and you hardly noticed his smashed nose.

"Hi, Mac," he said. "Get changed and let's go ashore."

"Where to?"

"Peacock or Flimflam or some gook town. Bn-4 says his broad's gal friend there shacks up with a captain who's got malaria real bad."

"Have fun," McGhee said. He sat on the edge of his cot and folded his poncho. Kocopy picked up his raincoat and stood still.

"Loosen up, Mac," he said. "You'll go asiatic this way."

"Let me be faithful for a while, Ted."

"It ain't in the books, chum."

"It's been done."

"Maybe by monks or something, but not men, Mac. I know you found one in a million, but you're Fleet Marine Force in the Field now."

"Roger," McGhee said. "I don't intend to pass up liberty, Ted. Just give me a chance to be romantic as all hell when I do fall."

Kocopy grinned and put on his cap.

"I always wondered what it was like romantic. Tell me sometime."

He went out, and you could hear the men counting cadence on the road. When the door closed you heard a light drizzle of rain on the roof. McGhee tried to adjust the heater so it would not smoke, then he lay down on his cot and stared at the ceiling. There was no acceleration of tempo or roll of tympani. It was a slow process. The distance covered was too immense. You traveled too far to do the fighting and were apt to lose the will to fight, let alone remember details for your wife and child. You were ordered not to keep a diary for fear it might fall into enemy hands, but it hardly mattered since you could be in New Zealand without even

a tourist's satisfaction of visiting the mountains and uncanny geyser country. Maybe you should accept the fornicator's-eye view and say you had seen the smaller hills anyway.

Coble came in wearing a steel helmet and poncho and carrying his carbine. He threw the carbine and helmet on the center cot and stripped off his poncho. He saw McGhee watching him and eased his frown.

"No," he said.

"Listen, Jack." McGhee sat up. "It's only false pride. You have no interest in those men as men. Take a better-trained outfit later."

"I'll make this bunch mad enough to fight."

"That's no way to do it. You'll get shot in the back."

"Horseshit, McGhee. When the chips are down they don't shoot officers in the back. That's a myth. I'll train those sad apples."

"Sure, Jack. You'd make a fine football captain. A great coach. But you're not going to tackle Japs or rassle 'em, or fight 'em with broadswords. You might outrun, outhike, outdrill every other platoon in the Corps, but that won't help your men shoot or think straight when they're out there on their bellies in a jam. Let me have this one."

Coble picked up his carbine and wiped it on his dungaree blouse. His pants were wet to the knees, and he was mad.

"Who the hell are you trying to impress?" he said.

"I thought you might listen."

"Go tell the major you're bleeding for honor and glory."

"Anyone who fights for honor and glory is psycho."

Coble sat down to run an oiler and thong through his weapon.

"What kind of talk is that?" he said. "What are you out here for?"

"Necessity. Because I don't believe the Japs or Nazis should take over. Honor and glory are just poetry to hide behind."

"Then why didn't you wait for the draft and a soft touch in the Army?"

"I wanted to choose my own poison."

"Don't kid me. You fell for the commission as well as anybody."

“Look, Jack.” McGhee bent forward. “We all enlisted and that’s beside the point. Right now I want to be with those men and you don’t.”

Coble pulled the oiler through quickly, his face red.

“Don’t crowd me, Mac. What’s so special about this bunch?”

“Nothing, except I came out with some of them. I’m sentimental.”

“Then you’re in the wrong outfit.” Coble looked up, his eyes suspicious as though he often faced dislike. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

“Not the way you treat those boys. Like dirt.”

“They are dirt. If they weren’t they’d be officers themselves.”

“Oh that’s a fine attitude. That’s really a dilly.” McGhee hit his left palm with his right fist and stood up and went to the window. “Why didn’t you tell the major you were a bully with a yen for authority? Why didn’t you take a load off his mind when he was trying to see what we were underneath? He would have handed you the platoon without a toss.”

Coble laid his carbine aside and was ready to rise.

“I won’t take much more,” he said. McGhee turned to him.

“Then wise up, Jack. Those sad apples are going to form a thin dirty line between you and the Japs. They go in first and get the closest and get shot at the most—not you or me or the commandant. Don’t get starry-eyed about your rank. Try to imagine once how it would feel to be in front of those sad apples instead of behind them. At least I give them credit for taking the brunt. Give me the platoon. Please.”

Coble rubbed his hands on his knees. Finally he managed a smile.

“Go to hell,” he said. “Go tell the major I’m too rough on your enlisted buddies, but don’t give me any more guff. I’ve got a system, and I’ll play it, and I bet I make captain before you do. Now lay off.”

“Oh Christ,” McGhee said. He stared at Coble with contempt, then turned to get his raincoat. “God pity the rank and file.”

In September there were many night problems and long hikes into the hills overlooking Cook Strait, and sometimes they drilled in rubber boats at the beach near Paekakariki where the breakers capsized badly handled boats and the water was very cold for swimming. In Wellington on liberty you could forget a bit what the training was for, and away from its quays and green hills the city reminded you a little of Spokane—a slightly damp and old-world Spokane with pubs, chemists, teashops, and open trams. You could go to the restaurants for steak and eggs that were better than the mutton in camp, and you were served real butter in quarter-pound blocks with hand-sliced homemade bread that you could never eat enough of. There was no rationing, but it was lonely without a girl. You could go to the Cecil Club and sometimes talk to one. Once in a while Willy was tempted to forget that Judy existed, but temptation involved competition with so many other marines that he usually took the early train back to McKay's Crossing and rested up for his next session with Lt. Coble.

Chick Woodruff said he would personally shoot the son of a bitch in the back on the next landing, but Willy figured an officer could not be at fault for upholding the stern traditions of the Corps. You should be a perfect private as well as perfect in any other rating, and Willy was far from perfect. When he failed to remember a thing as simple as the first position stoppages of the Browning Automatic Rifle, it was no more than right that the lieutenant should make him spend two hours in heavy marching pack. But he did fire capably with his new rifle and the BAR, so it was disappointing to have Lt. Coble call that accidental.

They also fired light machine guns, mortars, bazookas, and one morning the battalion's thirty replacements were schooled in the rifle grenade before going to the range to fire it. Lt. Coble explained the mechanism and safety precautions and held dry runs with dummy grenades, then he called a five-minute break and the smoking lamp was lit.

Willy did not smoke much yet, but he followed the other men down to the nearest tents. They sat on the steps of the tents, and Willy scraped at mud gummed to the soles of his boondockers. He was sitting between Leeper and Bonelli for warmth, and Flynn's knees were against his back, which helped too. Spring was chilly in New Zealand.

"Them rifle grenades scare me," he heard Emil Fischer say.

"Why?" Corporal Klein asked. They were on the next steps.

"Too clumsy. I hear they explode on the rifles sometimes."

"You're thinking of the old Mark I grenade," Klein said.

"The hell I am. Any live ammunition has bugs."

Klein and Fischer knew all about munitions models, but Willy did not like their conversation. There was no use worrying ahead of time.

"Them poor bastards in the rubber boats must be froze," Bonelli was saying. A cigarette hung between his lips while he kept both hands in the pockets of his combat jacket. The marine gunner had taken the veterans of the platoon to the beach again, and Bonelli considered anyone a poor bastard who was worse off than he was at the moment.

"Remember when we were kids?" Flynn said in his nice way. "How your mother never let you get wet feet in the rain? Now we even have to swim in it."

"Hope it don't rain till we get in from the range," Gosse said.

"It will," Bonelli told him bluntly. Nobody liked Gosse.

"They should give this country back to the Maoris," Gosse said.

"You oughta meet some people besides whores," Leeper told him. Leeper went to Otaki with Chick Woodruff every liberty, and he thought New Zealand was the finest place in the world. Chick thought so too, and Leeper collected most of his opinions from Chick or Bonelli. It was a funny thing about Leeper. He fouled up worse than Willy, but he usually got by with it because of his cocky front. Lt. Coble seemed to resent men who tried hardest, like Willy and Flynn and Emil Fischer.

Then Sergeant Barnard bellowed from the hillside for the detail to fall in. Bonelli jumped up, took a couple of running steps, turned

without stopping, and tossed his lighted cigarette at Private Willy.

"Have a butt," he said.

Leeper laughed as the cigarette hit Willy's chest and scattered sparks down his front. Willy brushed the sparks from his jacket while the other men ran on past him. He stepped on the cigarette Bonelli had thrown and then started away, but his name was called sharply. He did an about-face and saw Lt. Coble coming toward him from a side path.

"Pick up that butt," Lt. Coble said with a snap in his voice.

"Yessir." Private Willy went back and picked up the butt.

"You never learn, do you, Willy?" He stood rigidly at attention as the lieutenant stopped almost toe to toe with him. The lieutenant's eyes were flat and renitent like lenses on field glasses. His steel helmet seemed a natural shell for his head. Private Willy could clearly see the scar that looked like a cleat mark on his cheek, and he wondered if any woman would voluntarily go to bed with such stony masculinity. Nothing gentler than rape appeared compatible with Lt. Coble. "One of these days," the lieutenant said, "I'm going to run your little ass up to the captain like I should've done aboard ship." He kicked a heavy boondocker at a dozen fresh butts lying in the gravel path. "Look at these. What if the major saw those butts."

"Yessir," Private Willy said.

"Well why don't you think before you pull a stunt like this?"

"I don't smoke, Lieutenant."

"I saw you step on that butt. Do you deny it?"

"Nosir."

"Then get busy and pick these up. Police the whole company area."

"Now, sir?"

"Of course now. When else?"

"But the rifle grenades, Lieutenant."

"For god's sake." Lt. Coble looked at him as if he had made a bad joke, his mouth closing for a moment to taste the badness. "It don't matter whether you fire a cap pistol, Willy, let alone rifle grenades. You don't belong in this outfit. You don't have anything

it takes to be a marine, and I wish to hell they'd stop robbing the cradle for a job that needs men. You'll never be any good. Now snap to like you're told."

The lieutenant went on without waiting for a salute, and Willy knelt to pick up butts. Then Lt. Coble stopped and turned with a sort of smile.

"Another thing," he said. "String a hundred cigarette butts on a string with ten cigar butts. Bring it out to the range before we finish."

The lieutenant double-timed his men out of camp into a side valley where the range was, and later Private Willy heard muffled thwacks and thumps as the firing began. He did not find a hundred cigarette butts in the entire company area, although he went through the streets slowly and made sure they were clean enough to pass inspection. He went through empty tents to collect the rest of his quota from spit kits, and when he came out of Corporal Klein's tent with the tenth cigar butt the first sergeant caught him and asked what he was doing in other men's quarters.

"My aching back," the first sergeant said after Willy explained his assignment. "Those ninety-day wonders get better all the time."

He made Willy sit on the office steps to string butts. Willy pushed each one onto a big needle, drew it down a black thread, and after every tenth cigarette added a cigar butt. He was half finished when he realized there were no more muffled explosions from the rifle grenades. It was awfully quiet in camp, and it was getting ready to rain again. He always felt sad in the rain, but today he felt ready to recant and go back to Spokane. Yet you could not even admit failure once you had signed up for the duration.

He had started on the ninety-first cigarette butt when Lt. McGhee came up to the office. Lt. McGhee looked spruce and decent in his greens. He was pay officer and carried a dispatch case with money for the battalion patients at Silver Stream Hospital. He had black hair and a broad face that did not look quite completed. The nose and mouth were peculiarly small, but his eyes were wide and friendly. He lifted the end of Willy's butt garland and started to smile.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I threw a cigarette in the company street," Private Willy said.

"Whose idea was this?"

"Lt. Coble's."

Lt. McGhee dropped the end of the string and frowned. Then they both heard the phone ring in the first sergeant's office, and Willy concentrated on finishing his chore. But all at once he was listening to the top's phone conversation without moving at all.

"Killed?" the top said. There was a pause while he listened, and then he whistled. "My aching back." He said it as though he really felt a twinge. Then more calmly, "Goodo. I'll be right over."

Lt. McGhee had put one foot on the step beside Willy and was leaning forward with his elbow on his knee. A few drops of rain fell on Willy's hand, and he remembered that his rifle was still on the hillside where the class had met. He looked up at the sky. Clouds were thick and gray overhead, but westward toward Paekakariki and the beach there was blue sky and pale sunshine. It usually happened like that; most of the showers hit this battalion at the foot of the hills and missed camps further seaward. He wanted to go get the rifle and not hear why the first sergeant had said killed. That was no word to use here in New Zealand. But he did not move, and Lt. McGhee suddenly stepped up to the office doorway.

"What's wrong, top?" he asked warily.

"Accident at the range," the first sergeant said. "Three killed and a bunch hurt."

But things like that could not happen. The range was not the war, and if men died beforehand it would be terribly wasteful. Private Willy put the last cigar butt on his garland, took the needle from the thread, and tried to knot the two ends together. Then he saw Bonelli limping down the company street with his dungaree pants slightly torn and his rifle trailing almost on the ground. Willy had never seen Bonelli so subdued. For once he had no arrogance of any kind.

"What's up?" Willy asked, sitting still on the step.

"Christ," Bonelli said. "We nearly all got clobbered."

"How?" Willy asked. "What happened out there, Bonelli?"

"Lt. Coble got killed. And your buddy Flynn, and another guy."

"Killed?" Willy said. He had to doubt it. He remembered the scar on the lieutenant's cheek and the warm pressure of Flynn's knees against his back. No one could be dead that you had been with so recently, and officers especially were not people to be killed. This was only training.

"You never saw so much blood," Bonelli said. "One of them damn grenades didn't get off the rifle, and everybody close to it got hit."

Lt. McGhee stepped down beside Willy.

"Are you hurt, Bonelli?" he asked.

"Just a scratch," Bonelli said. "You oughta see Flynn, Lieutenant. He fired the gizmo, and you can't even recognize him. Lt. Coble got it in the face too. He was showin' Flynn how to fire, and then blooey."

The first sergeant came down the steps.

"You stick here," he said to Willy. "In case the phone rings or anything. I'm going over to sick bay and check up."

"Can I help?" Lt. McGhee's close-shaven beard seemed to have darkened.

"They brought in everybody from the range, Lieutenant," Bonelli told him. "They called ambulances, and outside of the dead ones nobody's hurt too bad. But Jesus Christ, Lieutenant. You could even see brains."

The first sergeant hurried away, unfolding his poncho. It was raining hard now, and Bonelli went to his tent. Private Willy stood up and felt his dog tags fall against his chest. If it was going to happen he should have been there. He knew nothing about death, but if he could not recant he should be hardened to the worst of it. He wanted to go ask Bonelli how Lt. Coble looked dead, yet he had been told to stay in the office. He stood on the step with the garland of cigarette butts dangling from his fist until Lt. McGhee reached down and took it.

7

"You won't need that any more," the lieutenant said. He gathered it into a messy ball and stared at it with his eyes squinted. "Poor Jack," he said. "Poor pigheaded son of a bitch."

The lieutenant went into the office, but Private Willy stood uncertainly in the rain trying to believe that Lt. Coble and his own tentmate Maynard Flynn had just been killed by an accidental explosion of ammunition intended for an enemy. Then he was scared. He did not think he liked being signed up for the duration—for either the duration of the war or the duration of Andrew Willy. He wondered what it would be like to be suddenly dead, and he did not want to find out at all.

He felt the shock, nor more was doom'd to feel . . .

chapter 2

1

It was not quite daylight, but the air on deck felt as hot as the air in front of an open oven. You could still see gun flashes and slow red streaks of shells arching over the water like lazy shots from a Roman candle. After the shells were well away you could hear the salvo from a battlewagon or cruiser or destroyer. In the transport area a few Higgins boats and amphibious tractors had already been launched, yet it seemed quiet. Men in combat gear stood by on all the upper decks, and the scrape of a canteen being withdrawn from the cup in its carrier sounded noisy. From time to time a winch hummed briefly in preparation.

Private Willy could not see where the shells were hitting, but he could feel a slight concussion from distant explosions. He was in an amphibious tractor hanging over the offshore rail of his ship. One of the communicators at his boat station had a radio tuned to a ship that was firing, and you could hear an observer say, "Salvo. Salvo." Then when the shells finally hit the island, "Splash. Splash." It was fascinating. He was beginning to learn how his nation softened up another before destroying it, and as long as he

could be a witness to this small invasion he no longer minded his passive part in it.

A talker in earphones passed the word to commence debarkation. At a signal from the officer in charge the winchman started to lower away the amtrac. Private Willy saw the decks disappear above him, and he bent his head back to watch the slender cable to the boom from which he hung. The mechanical ingenuity of it thrilled him. Ships brought men and gear to battle and dropped them off with a flick of a sailor's wrist. In a moment his amtrac would no longer be dependent on the big ship which had carried it for almost a month. It would be loose in the water and dependent only on its own stubby self and five men—a unit of military logistics capable of making its way to the beachhead where big ships could not go, to the focal point of life in his times.

The ship's steel plates rose like a solid wall set on the ocean's bottom. Up forward he saw Higgins boats hanging from davits and already full of assault troops. With a later start they would get ashore before the amtrac, but still he was one of the first from his ship to hit the water washing a spit of sand called Betio. His heart beat faster. He looked around to see how the others were taking it.

There were only a driver and relief driver besides Corporal Klein, Emil Fischer, and Willy. Except for steel helmets and cartridge belts their combat gear had been stowed in the driver's compartment to keep it dry. Corporal Klein had not yet put his on, but the other men wore faded blue kapok life jackets. Their platoon was in company reserve, and they had been detached to deliver battalion ammunition since it was not expected that reserves would be needed on such a tiny island.

A ton of bangalore torpedoes was already aboard, and the mission seemed important to Private Willy even though the others did not look excited about it. They were merely watching the hook so that when it slipped from the sling it would not hit them. Private Willy remembered the danger and climbed onto the stern. He crouched there as the amtrac smacked the water and bounced and swung the hook free. Corporal Klein and the relief driver scrambled to hold it, but the winchman hauled it skillfully above them.

The driver raced the motor, the amtrac moved off with a deafening roar of tracks, and they were safely launched.

It was daylight then. The sun rose out of the sea as they swung astern of the mother ship and moved forward to come alongside the number one hatch where they would load the rest of their ammunition. Private Willy crouched on the stern of the baby craft and stared toward the island. He could not see shells in flight any more or hear their impact, but he could see where they were hitting. Bursts of black smoke with a brief center of flame appeared and dispersed out there on what looked like a strip of darker ocean, a shadow on the horizon beneath a thin layer of smoke. Above it were planes—they moved too quickly for birds. He imagined he saw a hint of palm trees, but in any case the island was there—the barb on the hook of Tarawa Atoll, code name Helen. It was not exactly Helen of Troy, but it had launched a lot of ships.

He stared so intently toward shore that he forgot the task at hand. He did not see the descending cargo net full of 60-mm. mortar shells in black cloverleaf cases. It inched downward on a line from the boom and hovered just behind him. When Corporal Klein yelled it was too late. The amtrac dipped into a trough of waves, and the net hanging steady swept back across the stern. A ton of mortar shells nudged Private Willy between the shoulder blades, and he went overboard with a splash beside the bobbing amtrac.

"Hold it!" Corporal Klein hollered.

The winchman saw the accident and raised the netload a safe distance. The relief driver reached down with a strong arm and helped Private Willy back aboard. He had not been hurt, and the water had been warm, but he looked like a drowned pup as he sat dripping on the stern again. The relief driver laughed at him in annoyance.

"Goddammit," he said. "Watch out what you're doing."

Private Willy grinned foolishly and hated himself. Even without Lt. Coble he had spoiled the whole impersonal spectacle of D day. Nothing would ever make a Complete Warrior of him.

The sun got brutally hot, but Private Willy never did dry out. Water splashed constantly in over the low sides of the amtrac, and you could taste brine no matter how much you wiped it away or blew out puffs of breath through clenched teeth. Your eyes smarted from it. Ponchos might have helped, but they were wrapped around two machine guns and spread futilely over ammo. When the long lines of LCVs and tank lighters began to pass, the splash grew worse in their wakes.

But it was just like rehearsals at Hawke Bay and Efate, and Willy shielded his eyes from the spray to watch his own platoon go by. Lt. McGhee sat beside the coxswain in place of Lt. Coble, and the men trusted him more. Their faces above the gunwales now looked smaller than usual under mottled camouflage covers on their helmets.

He waved to Chick Woodruff, the only one looking in his direction instead of at the island. Chick brightened and waved back, then jabbed a derisive index finger at the man hanging over the side and heaving up his steak and egg breakfast. It was Leeper. Chick pantomimed laughter across the water, and Leeper's weakness made up somewhat for Willy's accidental plunge from the amtrac. He felt better about that and about Chick Woodruff. It had been hard for him to like the ugly little devil who had enlisted at fifteen and won a Silver Star on Guadalcanal and never mentioned the fact, but maybe by laughing together about Leeper's seasickness they could be real friends after the battle.

Then the boats left the amtrac far behind. It was wet and hot and peaceful on the blue Pacific. It was a very long ride from ship to shore, yet the line of palm trees was growing more distinct. Once he had thought there could be no explosions in equatorial heat, but there were plenty of them today. Formations of planes looked like angry swarms of bees above the smoke, and when they swooped down to drop a load they seemed to bounce back up afterward because of the explosions. A destroyer lay in close ahead and pounded

shells straight at the island. Altogether it might well be, as Lt. McGhee had often said in discussing plans for the landing, "the greatest concentration of aerial bombardment and naval gunfire in the history of warfare to date."

But it would soon be over, and marines would go snooping and drooping through the wreckage as they did on any field problem. Nothing could be left alive on that beach, yet Willy rather hoped there would be. He knew now how to open an invasion by pounding from a distance until the enemy was groggy and you could wade ashore with no trouble. But how did you go about the final annihilation? He wanted a few Japs left alive for that demonstration. He did not want another Kiska.

His face felt pickled. As he wiped it he thought he felt actual grains of salt in the water. He decided to have a cigarette. They had never smoked in the amtrac during maneuvers, but Corporal Klein and Emil Fischer were trying to keep cigarettes lighted near the stern, and the relief driver had crouched in the cab to smoke with the driver. Being closer to the cab Willy crawled on his belly down an incline of mortar shells to the entrance. He asked if he could borrow a weed, but they did not hear him. For a while he watched water splash against the slit of window, wondering how you could guide a vehicle with so little vision. The noise confined in the cab was unbearable. He touched the driver on the shoulder and made motions of smoking.

"Sure," the driver yelled. He handed Willy a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches. He was a heavy-set Slav with a pug face who appeared born to thrive on the wrack and roar of heavy machines. When Private Willy returned the cigarettes the driver yelled patiently, "You're welcome. I brought plenty along. Maybe you'll need some ashore."

Willy crawled back up onto the shells, and the relief driver came out to sit facing him. Willy took only a couple of drags on his cigarette before the water put it out, but he had had all he wanted.

"How much longer till we get in?" he shouted across to the relief driver who sat with his back to the shore and looked sleepy.

"Quite a while," the relief driver said.

"Think there'll be any Nips left?"

"Dunno. Hope not."

Behind them Willy could see all the ships strung out, and there were more ships than he had believed possible. He could remember the day when he had never seen any. Then he thought of something else.

"Do you know where to go today?" he shouted.

"Sure. The control boat tells us."

Someone had thought of everything, so Private Willy pulled his helmet down over his eyes and felt like a retracted turtle as spray hit it. Although never before in his life had he rattled along to battle in a contraption called an Alligator, it seemed perfectly normal. He was the same person he had always been. With all those big hairy Guadalcanal veterans ahead of him he had nothing to worry about. But supposing Lloyd and Frances in Spokane were given a magic view of their little brother among all these small craft and armed men heading for a hostile shore. It would probably scare them spitless.

Or Judy, he thought. It had been months since he had pictured Judy clearly, but suddenly he felt more than ever in love with her. He longed to know what she was doing at this minute and tried to figure out what time it would be in the states when it was early morning at Tarawa. Maybe it was late afternoon and she would be leaving school, because it was November and she had said she was going to business college. With the sun so hot and water so warm it did not seem like November to him. Time and seasons had gotten out of hand, but one thing was certain. He loved Judy beyond seasons or the moment. More than ever his big dream was of permanence with her, of a real home for them together.

He imagined her dark brown eyes and black hair. A year ago he had been walking with her from high school. He remembered the streets of Spokane, overcast skies, and elm and locust and maple trees bare for winter. He remembered the sound of fallen leaves underfoot and the cold wind making her legs red above her bobby sox. He had kidded her about wearing such sox and had given her a pair of nylons for Christmas. She had given him the

wallet now wrapped in a condom in his hip pocket and containing a photograph of Judy and a pound note left from New Zealand.

How things change in a year; how far you can travel, and how little difference distance makes to something you love. He remembered his agony on Judy's front porch when he had asked her to marry him and she had refused. Perhaps he was glad she had refused. He would return to her better for it—wiser, more capable, more worthy, more in love. Growing up was not a matter of new organs or days on a calendar but of experience, and now when they got their own home he would have been identified with the world's struggles and become a man in all ways. She could be decently proud of him without knowing there had been opinions like Lt. Coble's or embarrassments like falling overboard from an amtrac. Again he was glad this battle of Betio would be short. He could return to Judy without repetitious months of suffering such as the Guadalcanal boys had known, and maybe the war would end everywhere. He might even find his chance for battle fame today—a sniper miraculously left alive in a palm tree, sniping at the commanding general until knocked down with a single shot by Andrew (n) Willy, pvt, USMCR. . . .

He heard explosions above the roar of the amtrac and knew he had been dozing. He pushed back his helmet and sat up quickly. Just ahead of them another destroyer was firing salvo after salvo from its five-inch guns directly into the island. The island itself now was a low flat rise on the water with palm trees extending far to the left. It looked two and a half miles long, and many fires were burning on it to cause the smoke. Bomb and shell bursts threw jets of debris up through that hanging smoke, and when the furious whams of the destroyer's guns were quiet you could hear or feel faintly explosions on the island above the constant noise of the amtrac.

It made your stomach constrict on itself. It was not what you expected. The first wave of amtracs should have landed long ago, followed by supporting waves of Higgins boats. If ships still shelled and planes still bombed, there was danger of hitting marines. It was such a small island, and by this time there should be nothing but

a small-arms mop-up. There was too much confusion somehow.

Willy saw that the relief driver had moved forward to direct the driver on a stricter course by tapping him on one shoulder or the other. Corporal Klein and Pfc Fischer were sitting low among the shells, but no one appeared especially worried. Private Willy swallowed his doubt.

He realized that there was no splash now either. The water had become calm and a light clear blue, an intense and beautiful blue. Then he knew they had come through the reef into the lagoon that Lt. McGhee had often discussed. He grew curious and leaned out to look down beyond the commotion of the tracks. He wanted to see what coral looked like on the bottom, but he could not tell much about it. Yet he did see a number of bright orange fish floating dead on the water. He wondered why they were dead and all at once knew that the concussion of exploding shells had killed them. Then he remembered a rifle grenade that had killed Lt. Coble and Maynard Flynn, and he was suddenly nervous.

In a little while he would see dead men—dead Japs. He had never quite believed that he would, but now that he was about to he wished he had joined the Navy. Combat made a better spectacle from aboard ship.

3

The officer on the control boat called directions through a portable loud-speaker. It made his voice harsh and unnatural.

"Go on in and unload," he said. "Keep to the right of the pier and come straight back out." He pointed to the pier in the distance, then added, "Boats can't get ashore. We need every Alligator we can get to shuttle men in. Make it as fast as you can."

The relief driver saluted acknowledgment with a flick of his fingertips to his helmet. He bent to give the driver the word, and the amtrac ground into gear. There seemed to be hundreds of Higgins boats circling at the line of departure, and if the men in them were not ashore who was? Private Willy's heart beat faster, but he trusted the planning of this invasion. When they passed the boats

the smell of Diesel exhaust and cordite and burning became strong and sickening. The hollow roar of many motors racing and idling, the increasing blast of explosions, almost drowned out the grinding of the amtrac moving in alone.

An uncomfortable excitement formed inside him, and he thought he had might as well be ready. He crawled into the cab to get his rifle. He also brought out the rifles of Corporal Klein and Pfc Fischer, crawling back to them across the mortar shells. They looked curiously preoccupied.

"Thanks," Corporal Klein said. "We might need 'em after all."

Private Willy wanted to stay close to someone, but he did not like the preoccupation of those two. He went forward again. The relief driver had taken the poncho from the right machine gun and lay so that he could look along its barrel and at the same time reach down to direct the driver. Willy decided to unwrap the machine gun on the left, since neither Klein nor Fischer was taking an interest in it. He felt presumptuous stretched out behind it in a warlike position, yet nobody challenged his right to be there. Then he remembered sheepishly that the gun was empty and his position was all sham anyway.

But the relief driver had loaded his gun, so Willy decided to half-load the one he had, for appearance's sake. He slid his rifle stock-down into the cab, took the brass end of the ammo belt from its box, lifted the top cover of the gun, laid the first cartridge across the belt-holding pawl, closed the cover, and pulled the cocking handle to the rear, letting it ride forward to line up the first cartridge with the firing chamber. He performed the operation with great care, as though showing Lt. Coble that he knew the manual. His success pleased him, yet at the same time he thought someone was bound to chew him out for presuming to be a machine gunner on a trip classified as rear echelon.

He looked ahead again. They were not making much progress, although the only boats remaining in front of them were quite close to the shore and apparently drifting. He wondered if it were possible that the control-boat officer had meant literally what he said about boats being unable to get ashore. Willy tried to make out

people on the faraway beach. He could see only smoke and fire and the blast of explosions which reverberated now as if the amtracs were silent. There were idle machines of some sort scattered at the edge of the water too. At first he identified them as amtracs, but he could not be sure. Possibly they were Jap tanks that had been destroyed by marines.

Then he saw something entirely wrong, and his stomach constricted more tightly. A big tank lighter had been hit beyond doubt. It lay off to the left in line with the pier, just its nose sticking out of the water, the ramp still closed across its prow with the top bars looking like the naked black ribs of some nautical skeleton. For the first time he felt real fear and tasted its dryness in his mouth. A tank lighter was immeasurably larger than an amtrac and would require a lot of sinking. Japs could hardly have done it. He believed ships or planes had gotten off target and were endangering their own men.

A cracking noise above his head distracted him. It sounded as if hail pellets were hitting glass. He raised up to see what it was, and the relief driver yelled at him from the other machine gun.

"Keep down! They're shooting at us!"

Instantly he remembered hearing those little cracks on the rifle range in San Diego when he worked the butts. He had thought they were caused by paper in the targets snapping as bullets passed through, but there was no paper overhead here. He lay flat, oddly elated by the knowledge that projectiles themselves make a sound in the air.

The overhead snapping became rapid and steady as a machine gun picked them up. He tried to burrow lower into the mortar shells, yet when that burst stopped he raised his head to see where it had come from. Curiosity was still greater than fear, but the moment his head came up an irregular snap of rifle fire from no determinable source made him duck again. They were still too far from shore to see the slightest sign of life or guns. Then he realized that he was being shot at. Private Willy—just plain Andrew Willy—was actually being shot at by the Japanese. It was an incredible thing, and he was amazed. But it meant that real live Japs were left on

Tarawa and were making a bad mistake. They were not supposed to shoot at him. It was no part of the plan, because he was not dangerous. He was simply a guy from Spokane riding ashore in a cargo amtrac to see how fighting was done. If the Japs got you mixed up with assault troops, what were you supposed to do in return?

He glanced to the others for guidance. The relief driver had slid down into the well in the shells behind the driver's compartment and was shouting at the driver to bear right. At the ship this relief driver had fished Willy out of the water with calm exasperation, but now his eyes had a wideness and his body a stiffness that made Willy look away quickly. The fellow was scared. Willy glanced around at Corporal Klein and Pfc Fischer. Their heads were down, buried in their arms. They were as low as they could get on the load of shells, which kept their backs just below the gunwales. They were not trying to do anything except avoid those snapping little projectiles coming out of nowhere.

Then the bottom dropped out of Willy's stomach. His whole body seemed to swell with uselessness and fear. The landing was not going to be a pushover. The sounds alone were shattering. Japs had not evacuated the island like another Kiska, nor were they groggy from shelling. They had kept alive enough to wreck that tank lighter, as he understood now, and an amtrac loaded with explosives could be blown to hell and gone in short order. Troops could not wade ashore without trouble, and rifle and machine-gun fire seemed to come from the water itself since shore was so far away yet. But the worst of the situation to Willy was his lack of support in it. He had believed that even if he became frightened under fire, no one else would. With everyone apparently afraid of violent death, he felt betrayed.

Cleats dug into coral on the bottom of the lagoon, and the amtrac began to move in jerks as if blown by explosions from side to side. Instead of swimming it began to walk on the bottom and rise up out of the water, making a better target. A machine gun on the left accepted this larger exposure and opened up. Bullets slashed into the metal pontoons of the amtrac. Willy strained

against the one that would hit him, until all at once anger appeared in his fear.

Damn those little yellow sonsabitches who hadn't died properly in the bombardment. Damn their deadly guns searching for him. The unused machine gun in front of him could give as good as it got. No one had told him to fire it, but neither had anyone told him he would be fired at.

He reached up and swung the gun to the left, pulled the cocking handle back to full-load it, then raised his head to sight. He saw the pier far to the left ahead. The water now was muddy and churned rather than blue, and the pier reached out on it like a line on the map he had studied aboard ship. But when he saw the pier he could not fire.

He remembered how they had been warned not to fire at it. The plan called for friendly troops to clear it immediately, so that it could be used for unloading supplies. But was the plan still in effect? Machine-gun fire certainly came from that direction. He watched white streaks in the water beside him; plowing bullets. He searched for signs of firing on the pier or on the shore beyond it. As he looked the single cracks of rifle fire began to snap at his head. Still he looked. Somewhere somebody was trying to get him, but he could not see anything to indicate a source of firing. Should he spray the pier anyway?

Then he heard machine guns snapping at him from in front, two or more. He ducked again. What was the use of looking for the source of death? Why did the driver keep going into it? They were surrounded, trapped. There were nothing but Japs on the island, and he felt sick with a big heavy fear. They had not told him about the enormity of this fear. They had made cracks about dirtying your pants when you were scared, but this was nothing like being nervous or excited. It was a deep and smothering feeling like shock, and he pressed his nose and cheek against a wet black case of mortar shells while waiting to be hit. He had to be hit in order to prevent the experience from continuing.

But the relief driver was punching him in the ribs. He rolled his face over the mortar-shell case to see what was wanted.

"You all right?" the relief driver shouted.

Willy tried to answer, but his mouth did not seem to work any more. He nodded. The relief driver pointed to something above his back.

He rolled his head around to look. In the steel side of the amtrac an inch or two below the top were three bullet holes with the steel all splattered back. They appeared to be on a line with Willy's spine, and the sight of them was like touching them. His nerves registered a chill. But he could feel no holes in himself until all at once a new hole appeared in the steel ahead of the other three, almost on a level with his eyes. His ears rang with the sound of it, his cheek smarted, and then he felt blood running down his face. The worst had happened, and he lay there horrified, waiting for pain to increase and everything to go black.

With shattering suddenness the sky overhead burst into a hysterical staccato of new explosions. He shut his eyes and tried to shrink quickly into oblivion. Yet before the first staccato series ended, another burst hysterically above him. He had to look up. He opened his eyes and saw an airplane streaming puffs of smoke from its wings as it swept out of sight ahead. Another plane followed, its staccato machine guns popping as smoke puffs trailed from its wings. For a wild moment he thought black circles under the wings were Jap insignia, black suns, and on top of everything he was being strafed. Then he realized that they were American planes strafing the far side of the island. The black circles were wheels. He swung his head down and toward the relief driver.

"I think I'm hit," he screamed.

The relief driver looked at him with wide shocked eyes. Then he reached over with his hand to feel beneath the blood on Willy's face.

"It's only a scratch," he yelled. He turned away as if not wanting to see any more of anyone else's predicament in case death did strike. Willy accepted the verdict that he was not fatally wounded and also looked away, but he was numb with a terror that seemed to be the only substance to which his mind was any longer attached. And although he could no longer believe what was going on, or

understand or absorb it, he had to raise his head again. He had to make that single possible effort to bring events into line and find a point of reference in the savage confusion surrounding this mad-denyingly slow amtrac.

As his head came up he was further shocked to see men in the water. They were to his right between the amtrac and the rusted hulk of a sunken Jap ship, almost close enough for him to distinguish grim faces. But he had no recognition of them. If they were wading chin-deep in muddy water they must be Japs—fantastic little monkey-men trying to blow him up, as training pamphlets said they sometimes did. He reached out to swing his machine gun around and spray them. Then once more he remembered the sunken tank lighter and knew these men in the water were marines. His own buddies wading helplessly with no place to go. . . .

He could not look at them then. He turned to the pier. Two men were running along it toward the shore. He swung the machine gun in that direction to shoot them. He had to shoot something. He had been shot at from all directions, and he had to pay someone back. But again he hesitated, held by persistent threads of training. Maybe those were marines. Maybe a few of them had gotten ashore. The men in the water might be headed for the pier, believing that marines were there, somebody friendly. Why in Christ's name didn't the whole insane racket stop long enough for him to find out what was what?

He pressed his forehead against the shell case. No shred of bravery or eagerness remained in him. He wished the amtrac would turn back, would run away, would do anything but jerk and grind its elephantine way through stinking yellow water. The operation plan had been wadded up and thrown away with real men forgotten inside it. For some reason the shelling ships and planes had done no good. The Japs had chewed up the big shells and were spitting them back in smaller pieces at unprotected marines on the water like ducks in a shooting gallery. It ought to stop immediately and totally before anyone got hurt bad, but now there was bigger stuff going over the amtrac. High-powered projectiles began to beat a vibrant wham into his ringing ears, and once more he had

to raise his head to see what was going on. If only he could see, actually see, some source for the shooting, some definite thing to fight back at.

A hundred yards to the right of his amtrac he saw another one. He just had time to think that at least they were not alone when he saw the other amtrac get hit. It stopped abruptly and completely against a burst of smoke materializing in front of it, as if the smoke itself could cause the stopping. With its machine guns pointing stupidly at the sky, that other amtrac sat dead on the water. Three men spilled out.

"They're hit," Willy yelled. He pointed, and the relief driver stuck his head up cautiously. And just then their own amtrac was hit.

Willy did not see or hear the explosion. He only realized that they too had stopped, his ears were not ringing any more, and smoke was blowing across his face. It was impossibly quiet, as if a truce had been granted. The motor and grinding tracks were still, and the snap of small-arms fire and crash of big stuff sounded immensely distant.

He looked in surprise at the relief driver and saw his left arm bare and bleeding from a deep gash above the elbow. Yet the relief driver did not seem to notice. He was leaning into the cab. From a great distance Willy heard a voice too feeble for the amount of desperation in it.

"They got us," the relief driver shouted. "They got us, Ski."

Willy pulled himself over to look into the cab. Smoke trailed out of a jagged hole in the corner. The driver sat there dazed, looking back, stone deaf from concussion, yelling, "It won't go. It conked out." And the whole right side of his face was nothing but blood.

"Let's get out," the relief driver yelled. Willy could barely hear him. "Come on, Ski. Before this ammo blows up."

With his good arm the relief driver pulled the heavy Slav out of his seat. Then the driver began to claw his way out of the cab. Willy could not seem to move. He was supposed to go ashore with a load of ammunition. He was not supposed to wade helplessly in the water like those other guys. He was not supposed to be with

wounded men. Where could he find help? Where was Lt. McGhee? Where could he hide?

Plugs seemed to pop out of his ears. Sounds regained intensity to a background of frenzied ringing in his head. Tinny as it was, recovered hearing brought him into relationship with the general confusion again—boat motors far behind, a whine of planes over the island, the two-part carumphs of their bombs, the crack of rifle fire immediately around him, and the lack of an amtrac motor under him. Then he knew he had to escape at least being blown up by a load of mortar shells and bangalore torpedoes. He reached into the cab for his rifle, a marine's best friend. The stock bent crazily from a splintered break in the middle. It was useless. He dropped it and crawled overboard.

The water was cloying and dishwater warm. His feet touched bottom, but his life jacket buoyed him off balance. Corporal Klein and Pfc Fischer were behind the amtrac hollering for him to come that way. They held their rifles at high port above the water and half swam, half walked, toward the left and the pier. The relief driver was helping the driver move after them, and Willy finally realized that he was not wounded and should help the ones who were. It gave him no confidence to be unwounded except for a scratch on his cheek, but he pushed through the water to take the driver's right arm. He stared at the scrambled eye and blood on the right side of that human face and almost let go of the arm. Yet the driver appeared to smile at him in gratitude for his help, and said, "Let's go, cobber."

Willy felt like a brittle rod of consciousness encased in a numb and unprotecting sponge of fear. His consciousness functioned in a peculiarly irrelevant way, and he kept thinking that the Slav and relief driver floundering beside him were what newspapers called casualties. The word casualties pounded at his mind with every explosion. They were things you heard about but never had anything to do with. Somebody else looked after them, only these men were not in a hospital with doctors and nurses fussing over them. They were struggling along in neck-deep water and an unearthly bedlam,

not knowing where they were going or what they would do when they got there, but going nevertheless.

The driver with the scrambled eye did not move very fast. With bullets snapping overhead and sometimes hissing into the water, that was not good. Then Willy remembered first aid. His first-aid kit was still on his cartridge belt beneath the water. Even though he was all but swimming he still wore a belt with two canteens of fresh water and a first-aid pouch and other contraptions. He had on a kapok life jacket and steel helmet, had no weapon, but still he wore that heavy belt.

He choked down an irrelevant tendency to laugh. With his free hand he fumbled under the water for the pouch. He got it open as they moved on after Klein and Fischer, and he came up with the flat yellow box of sulfa tablets. It looked giddily bright and slick, yet it had been designed for emergencies. Apparently this was an emergency. He started to see if the battle dressing was dry so that he could put it over the driver's eye, but the imagined excruciation of cloth on mangled eye nerves made him give up that idea.

He turned loose of the driver's arm, tore open the yellow box, and found two large white tablets still dry. He stopped the driver and put one sulfa tablet in his bloody mouth. The Slav took it solemnly, as though it were a holy wafer. He chewed it with one eye gone and half his face unrecognizable. Willy reached over to place the other tablet between the bloodless lips of the relief driver. He also chewed dutifully. Then with the ceremony completed, with first aid rendered under fire, the three of them started on through hot brackish water behind Corporal Klein and Emil Fischer, several hundred yards from an island shore which seemed nothing but a compact strip of violence.

Willy saw that Corporal Klein was leading them straight ashore now instead of toward the pier. Shore did look closer, but impossibly far even so. From time to time Fischer turned to wave and shout unintelligible information or encouragement, but Willy did not care where he went as long as someone else led him. The driver moved more and more slowly; now and then they had to drag him

bodily. At times all three of them stopped altogether, when the relief driver gave out too with the pain of his torn arm and exertion of covering distance in the drag of water, or when bullets splashed in front of them. At other times they tried to hurry as bullets splashed beside them or close behind.

Again Willy tried to pick out figures on the beach. All he could identify for sure were what he had thought a while ago to be knocked-out Jap tanks. They were knocked-out marine amtracs. Beyond them on the shore ragged palm trees looked wind-blown as if in a heavy storm. Above the palms, smoke, dead amtracs, and incessant noise the sun hung like a high fever. Nothing ahead offered real hope, but for the sake of sanity he had to believe marines were somewhere ashore to protect him from further calamity. Something had to go right.

Then Corporal Klein disappeared. He was suddenly no longer beside Emil Fischer. Fischer reached into the water and pulled up his limp figure, held it for a long time, tried to move forward with it, gave that up, and Corporal Klein was gone for good. He never had put on a life jacket.

Irrelevant fastidiousness made Willy bear left to avoid the spot where Corporal Klein had disappeared. His two casualties followed without question, and when he turned directly toward shore again the water became so shallow that he understood why Higgins boats had been unable to get in. There simply was not water to float them. And then rather than stand upright in unshielding air they were crawling on their bellies through mud and slime which shook beneath them every time something big exploded on the island. They moved with increasing difficulty, and eventually it seemed less attractive to move anyway because they were getting so close to the explosions with no evidence of protection. When Willy looked for Emil Fischer again, he saw no sign of him. No sign at all.

He was sick and stunned and exhausted, but at last he did see marines on the beach. They were not victorious marines. They were merely dusty figures lying motionless on their bellies, scarcely distinguishable from sand, maybe dead. Yet they were recognizable

as marines by entrenching tools and packs on their backs, and if they were dead he was willing to join them simply for peace and quiet.

Then he saw two of them rise up and peer over a low wall of coconut logs. One of these suddenly sprang over the sea wall with belts of machine-gun ammunition draped around his shoulders like monstrous leis. He disappeared as though swallowed by smoke while his buddy fired at something. Further along the wall another marine raised up and lobbed a hand grenade into the smoke. The irrelevant part of Willy thought of the Dutch boy with his finger in the dike, but the rest of him nearly collapsed with thankfulness at the sight of living buddies.

He could place himself and his casualties in their hands, and they would protect him now. He jerked at the driver to drag him forward a few more yards and was dismayed by his own weakness. The long struggle through water had drained him of strength. But the relief driver, pale and gasping, dragged himself along with his good arm and managed to help a little with the Slav. They inched forward. Once Willy saw the gash in the relief driver's arm as it came out of the water. It looked like the slit belly of a fish, white and bloodless and inhuman, hardly the arm that had heaved him into the amtrac earlier.

They were almost on the beach when the Slav quit moving. The relief driver gave up too, and Willy's own muscles quivered uselessly. He had to have help. Not many yards ahead sat a fellow with his back to the sea wall. He was cleaning a pistol on his knee, and the pulverizing blast of shells close behind him did not even make him flinch. Only officers and NCOs had pistols, so Willy crawled on alone to ask advice.

His left foot caught in a tangle of rusty barbed wire. As he kicked to untangle it he found himself staring at the leg of a dead marine. He knew it was a marine because of boondockers on its feet. The body was sprawled face forward as if fallen in running, its arms flung out and the right hand touching the stock of an M-1. He knew it was dead because the exposed leg had a waxen and unhealthy color, and the leg twisted at too painful an angle for

a living man. But what fascinated him most about the leg, while he kicked at the barbed wire to free himself and reach the safety of the sea wall, was black hair sticking out of it sparsely and inappropriately. It reminded him of black bristles on the hide of a butchered hog he had once seen his brother Ralph clean, and he kept thinking that he should have found a dead Jap first. But if it had to be a marine it should at least have had more dignity than to remind him of a butchered hog. Then he tore his dungarees from the wire and believed himself on the verge of destruction by the very sounds of battle beating around him.

The marine at the sea wall rubbed the barrel of his .45 with an oily patch and watched Willy approach as though dispassionately watching a child do its first crawling. He was sheltered on his right by a mound of sand and on his left by an amtrac stalled against the sea wall. Across the gunwales of the amtrac hung another dead marine, like an abandoned puppet, and Willy thought death must be universally less dignified than living. He reached the feet of the live marine and lay panting with his face in the sand. Now he had done all he could. He was on Betio, he had had his baptism of fire, and he was through.

"You all right, fellow?" the marine with the pistol asked. His voice sounded faint and faraway among the explosions. Willy raised his head to reply but could only nod. Then he saw that this man had been shot through the leg. His dungarees were torn and stained a dull brown that did not look like blood, but a white battle dressing had been tied above the knee and was beginning to show red. Who was not hurt here?

"What's your outfit?" this casualty asked.

Willy overcame the dryness of his mouth to make necessary words, then pointed desperately toward the two amtrac drivers.

"I know," the casualty said. "I never thought you'd get this far. Haven't seen your outfit, so report down the beach to the guy at the radio."

"But I can't," Willy said. "They're wounded and need help."

"I know, I know, I know." The fellow sounded angry. He touched the barrel of his pistol to his bad leg. "We all need help,

and you're as whole as anyone. Go on down there where you can do some good."

"But I haven't got a rifle," Willy shouted helplessly.

"Pick one up, for chrissake." The casualty pointed his pistol to the M-1 near the dead marine. "We've got more rifles than men."

There was authority in his voice, whoever he was. Willy resented it and dropped his head to the sand, realizing that he would do as he was told. Something catastrophic had been started and could not be stopped. He was a part of it. One nation was not destroying another here. It was not even individual against individual, like a decent fight. It was a mechanized atrocity smashing at mere individuals who had to face it alone, and there was no assurance that he could face it much longer. There was no assurance of anything any more, but no matter what exhaustion or despair or fear he felt, he was still able-bodied. That was more than anyone else he had started with could say, maybe more than any of his company or battalion could say. Where were Lt. McGhee, Chick Woodruff, Leeper, Bonelli, the rest of them? Possibly dead, and any end to this crashing insanity somehow depended on the able-bodied, even if Andrew Willy too ended soon like a butchered hog.

A near miss threw sand over him from beyond the sea wall. Steel fragments whined past, and he groveled on the ground with renewed fear. When he raised his head afterward he glanced at the hard face of the NCO with a hole in his leg. It offered nothing. Willy crawled sickly back to the dead marine and took his rifle.

Further out he saw the driver and relief driver lying side by side with their feet in the water, motionless. They might be dead already, and suddenly he detached himself from them. He lost all sense of pity for them or the dead marine whose rifle he had or for himself. He felt a surge of cold fury at the way of things, and he rose to a crouch and sprinted at a stoop down the beach in the direction of the guy with the radio, thinking, Shoot me! Go ahead, you bastards. Shoot me!

He ran thirty or forty yards, past the stalled amtrac with the marine across its gunwales and more dead in the sand on the other side of it, past scattered equipment and tangled barbed wire and

other prone bodies, until he saw a cluster of living marines around what he figured must be the radio. Then he dropped exhausted and afraid again.

Beside him lay many men face down with their heads against the bottom of the sea wall. Most of them had bandages on arms or legs or chests, and they were not in a hospital either. One wave of marines seemed to have hit the shore and broken badly. From the looks of it reinforcements would never get ashore.

When he got his breath he became aware of the kapok life jacket still padding his chest. It was not bullet-proof, but it was very hot. He took it off and threw it on the sand like a shed skin, then examined his borrowed rifle. Salt water had already rusted spots on the barrel, and there was sand in the chamber and bore. Automatically he reached into his hip pocket for the oilskin packet of cleaning gear. He had put it there because he had been taught to touch up his rifle to please officers, and all his training seemed as picayunish as that. Nothing had quite prepared him for this, but maybe nothing could have.

He wanted to lie there as long as possible, yet he might need a workable weapon momentarily so he opened the pouch and fumbled out his oiler and thong, oil can, toothbrush, and a few cloth patches. His hands were stiff but not trembling. He cleaned the barrel and working parts of the rifle, dried and cleaned clips of ammo from his cartridge belt, and stopped often to listen to the threats of battle. An overlapping chatter of rifle and machine-gun fire never stopped. He knew the sharp crack of passing bullets and whine of ricochets. Soon he identified the resounding crashes of naval gunfire and aerial bombs further distant. You could feel them whoosh in bursting. But for a while he did not know exactly what caused the splash and whizz of brittle stuff nearby, until he decided from their frequency that they must be hand grenades and mortars. Then he twitched in the sand every time he heard one, because they were insidious and could come right down on top of you no matter how deep your hole. He had no hole at all.

And eventually he knew he must move again. His rifle was clean, he had an aching substitute for spent strength, and he might

be able to find a protective hole somewhere. He would have liked to find his own outfit, familiar faces as a point of reference, but because he had failed them by not getting their ammunition ashore he did not care too much. They might also have failed him by getting killed or by staying safely in the boats. You could not really depend on individuals or yourself or anything here. This kind of battle was viciously touch and go.

He crouched and ran to the command post. It was strangely inactive. At the radio somebody was copying messages, and a corpsman or a doctor worked quietly over a man with his back ripped open. A bottle of plasma had been tied to a rifle stuck in the sand beside them, and a rubber tube ran to the arm of the injured man. Lying on his elbow near the sea wall was a captain talking into a field telephone. Two black bars had been painted on each shoulder of his dungarees, but otherwise he looked as dirty and beaten as everyone else. Willy ducked down to wait. In these conditions it should be proper for a private to speak to a captain, the man most likely to know what was going on. What appeared to be going on was simply that everyone let bullets sweep by overhead unchallenged.

Behind the captain two upright marines suddenly came over the sea wall supporting a third figure with dragging feet. The captain pulled back against the wall and went on talking as they jumped down and dragged the wounded man toward the corpsman. The chatter of machine guns increased everywhere, then the captain threw the phone aside.

"The line's out again," he shouted through the racket.

Two wiremen got up and started along the wall with a spool of black wire between them. Willy spoke to the captain.

"They told me to report to you," he said. His mouth felt as dry as old leather. The captain put his hand on Willy's shoulder.

"Good boy," he said. He turned and pulled his head above the coconut logs and raised Willy up beside him. You could see smoky sand streaked with wrecks of palms and strewn with broken logs, charred timbers, blasted sheet metal, tangled wire, unexploded shells, piles of rubbish, smoking ruins, bodies, debris of every sort.

It was a stinking wasteland. It was as uninhabitable as a field of brimstone.

"Get the hell out there," the captain said. "Take the first hole you come to. Work with whatever group you find. Do whatever you can."

Willy could not do it. He was physically and mentally paralyzed by this view of man's power and penchant for slaughter. He would be dead in a minute if he went out there. Nothing could live through it, and no one should be asked to go to hell without something specific to fight at.

Then another surge of pure fury wrenched him, a sudden twist of outraged contempt for the whole business of man-made destruction forcing you to grovel in fear on your belly. He scrambled up over the sea wall, rose to a stoop, and ran. Machine-gun bullets kicked into the sand around him. He zigzagged maybe ten, maybe fifteen, maybe twenty yards, with a sense of slow motion as though moving through cotton, thinking now I've died, now I've died, this is the way it ends, you lousy sonsabitches.

And then he saw a hole. It was a big hole, a deep depression blasted in the sand by a shell. In it were three figures. He jumped into the middle of them, his rifle ready to shoot if they were Japs, almost hoping they were so he could die knowing what the enemy looked like.

One of them was a Jap, a very dead Jap. He lay face up, his chest ripped, his wrap-around leggings hanging loose on twisted legs, his mouth and eyes open and full of sand. In front of him a live marine leaned along the forward slope of the hole to fire irregularly out at something. Behind him sat another marine smoking a cigarette.

Willy lay panting where he had fallen, as if his legs were broken, touching all three of the hole's occupants and feeling ready to puke. The marine with the cigarette lifted one hand to his helmet in salute.

"Glad to have you aboard," he said with absolute sympathy.

The fellow's name was Salty Jones, and Private Willy knew finally that at least one other member of his battalion still lived. He had seen this Salty Jones aboard ship on the way from Wellington. The ragged brown beard was unmistakable, but like a chameleon Salty had already acquired the protective coloration of Betio's grime. He looked as though he had never had a bath and would not know how to act outside a foxhole. His helmet tilted over one ear, half a dozen hand grenades hung by their levers from his cartridge belt and buttonholes, and his rifle sat between his knees with the bayonet fixed. He was wiry, slow-spoken, and tranquil.

"Have a weed," he said. His eyes were pale blue, so pale that they looked bleached by this sun and this horror. Willy felt as if his own eyes had been likewise bleached by immersion and shock, but he took the cigarette Salty offered with a feeling of having discovered as much calmness as was left in the world. "Take a five," Salty said. "Then we'll move Mr. Moto topside." He kicked the split-toed shoe on the foot of the dead Jap. "Might as well get things shipshape."

"Thanks," Willy said. The cigarette was hot and distasteful, but he smoked all of it. Afterward he took a mouthful of tepid water from his canteen, then helped Salty roll the corpse out of the hole. It jumped under their hands as soon as it slid above the edge. Willy fell back weakly. Salty crouched and watched the jumping corpse wryly.

"Makes a damn nice sandbag," he said. "That friggin' machine gun on the left has been givin us holy hell all day."

The other marine turned and slid down beside them with his rifle as the whine of ricochets increased. Willy did not know him.

"Whew," he said. "Listen to them hornets. You guys should of left Mr. Moto alone. We'll never move outta here at this rate."

"Bullshit," Salty said. "Lemme have a crack at 'em."

"Take it away, Guadalcanal," the other marine said.

"Guadalcanal was never like this." Salty raised up to sight over

the rim of the hole. He used a full clip of ammo before he stopped firing, but return fire did not decrease. The other fellow shook his head and slipped his canteen from its holder.

"Man," he said. "That boy don't give a damn. Stick with him."

"What outfit is this?" Willy asked.

"No outfit," the fellow said. He drank a few swallows of water. "Some sergeant in the next hole says he's in charge along here. Some lieutenant on the other side says he'll give the orders. I don't know who they are, but Salty says we can move forward with either one."

"Jesus," Willy said. "Sounds sort of snafu."

"Sort of snafu for damn sure, buddy." The fellow screwed the cap on his canteen. "And it'll get worse if reinforcements don't get ashore." He closed his eyes and leaned back, looking infinitely tired. "Somebody goofed on this operation, and it wasn't the boys who hit the beach."

They did not move out of the hole that day. They saw one fellow on the left try to sneak forward, but he did not get two yards before he was dead. Someone else tried to drag him back, and he was dead too.

And then night came. It came much sooner than Willy expected, because until it came he had not thought he would see the end of that day. He had no idea of how long he had been in the water or when he had reached shore or what time looked like on Betio. For all he had known time itself might have become a battle casualty, exhausted beyond being able to pass, by the very events it supported.

"Stand by for a counterattack," Salty said as darkness closed in. "Them Nips'll throw everything in the book at us tonight."

They took turns pretending to sleep while one of them leaned wide-eyed and taut at the forward edge of the hole, bayonet fixed. Bombing and shelling died away, firing became sporadic, but dump fires and a leprous piece of moon helped keep the carnage in view. There was no relief, no comfort, because even silence raised the threat of sneak attack. Every shadow appeared to creep toward you. Mr. Moto seemed to come alive and move. There was a

hackle-raising rustle of land crabs in the sand. You feared sounds in your own body—muscle creaks, breathing, beating heart, ringing ears. You could not smoke, you could not talk, you could not rest, and you were sure the night-loving Japs would soon come screaming banzai to push this flimsy beachhead back out to sea.

Willy took a regular watch as he had done during the afternoon when he had fired at puffs of smoke or mounds of ground and never knew whether he hit anything or not. Now that muzzle blast from his rifle would be a giveaway in darkness he had two grenades to use if necessary, yet Japs frequently opened fire and you could not tell where it originated. In front of him, behind him, sometimes directly overhead, pink streaks of Jap tracers reached out of the night from no discernible source and for no discernible target. It was unanswered by friendly fire, unexplained, and hour after hour you dreaded what could be happening around you and getting ready to erupt in your face.

After the moon set an enemy plane came over. You knew it from a friendly plane immediately by a sort of imperfect quality to its drone, a kind of baling-wire uncertainty. It dropped a stick of bombs behind them, apparently in the water. Salty put his hand on Willy's knee.

"Old Washing-Machine Charlie," he whispered. "No danger."

Then when Willy took his last turn on watch he heard a rooster crow. The clear domestic sound of it was preposterous and wholesome and made peculiar nonsense of cowering in a hole afraid of your own heartbeat. And then it was dawn, as unexpectedly as it had been night. For some reason the Japs failed to attack while they had the advantage, and now at last you could begin to wonder if the advantage might shift.

Less than fifty yards ahead of his hole Willy saw three upright timbers supporting an extraneous crossbeam. They took on charred solidity in growing light and framed a further vista of tattered palms. In front of this frame and to its left he heard the sudden high-pitched burst of a Jap machine gun. In a jumble of corrugated metal he clearly saw the heads and shoulders of two Japs firing their weapon in enfilade, thinking themselves unobserved. He could

hardly believe it. They were the first live Japs he had seen. The little bastards had sneaked their Nambu into position during the night, because they had not been there yesterday. He loathed their patience and persistence. Very carefully, very deliberately, without having to shift position, he took aim at the cloth-capped head of the nearest Jap. He held his breath and squeezed off a shot. The Jap fell against his companion, and Willy saw surprise on the black-bearded face of the other Jap before he ducked. Willy shook with the only satisfaction he had known on Betio and waited to fire again.

A hand grenade sailed out of the corrugated metal toward him. Willy slid to the bottom of his hole terrified. The grenade exploded short of where he was, and Salty scooted over to him. As Willy told him about the gun, its high-pitched chatter began once more. Together Willy and Salty raised up. They could see nothing in the wreckage now, but Willy pointed out the gun's location. Salty pushed him back, readied a hand grenade, and let it fly. It also fell short, and the firing continued. Salty tried another grenade. This one kicked the wreckage around in exploding, but after the dust settled the firing started again. Salty swore and used a third grenade. No firing followed its detonation.

"Let's go on out there," he said to Willy.

"We wouldn't make it," Willy said.

"I think we could." Salty's pale eyes were red-rimmed and steady. He looked dog-tired but stubborn. "That's proolly the gun we had trouble with. Let's get it before the Japs do." He smiled a little. "Game?"

"All right," Willy said. "Whatever you say."

"Atta boy. We're no good tied down here." Salty turned to the other fellow who sat listening as though he did not care what happened. "George, you cover the chick and me till we get to them uprights. Then hightail it back to the beach for ammo. Bring us a potful of grenades and M-1 clips if you have to strip everyone in the CP."

With no more preparation than that, Salty crawled out of the hole and forward on his belly, his rifle across his arms. He crawled

almost gracefully, and Willy took a short breath and started after him. He saw Salty raise up and peer over the metal that had shielded the gun, then Salty waved him on. When he crawled into the machine-gun nest beside Salty he felt unemotional about the dead Japs sprawled with bulging eyes and wet red blood in the sand. Death was ugly, that was all.

But they had advanced a good distance with no opposition, and when they looked back they saw troops on the left moving forward in quick dashes, relieved of enfilading fire and attacking with a kind of involuntary unison and desperate relief for having survived the night and being able to attack. Then Willy realized that friendly planes were on station again, ships were shelling, mortars falling, grenades splashing, and a chatter of small arms and automatic weapons was as incessant as it had been yesterday. The sun felt brutally hot, as if it had never been gone, and he was farther inland on Tarawa and more battlewise than he had thought possible twenty hours ago.

"See?" Salty said. He shook Willy's shoulder affably. "If we secure this goddamn rock soon, maybe they'll ship us stateside."

They waited for George, and after a while he brought up his pack full of grenades and bandoliers of M-1 clips. He said the sergeant beside their old hole had said a pillbox on ahead was giving reserve troops hell in the water. Salty crawled through the smoking ruins to see what was on the other side. He came back utterly black of face and said there were a lot of pillboxes. He led them through a sort of tunnel in fallen corrugated roofing, and at the end of it they stopped behind a bank of sand. Over its top they could see two pillboxes side by side, made of coconut logs and nearly buried. The closest one was ten yards away, the other about ten yards beyond that. Both faced seaward, and muzzles of machine guns in them jumped with sustained bursts of firing. Looking out to sea Willy saw the dots of men in the water, many men, wading ashore as he had done yesterday. Boats had dumped them where the water grew shallow, and there they were.

"Christ on a crutch," Salty said. "They've got pillboxes covering pillboxes from hell to breakfast. It'll be hot out there, boys."

"You can say that again," George said.

"Well, let's try it." Salty set his rifle aside. "I'll take the far one, George, and you hit this first one. You can cover us, Chick."

Willy watched them both grip a grenade in each hand and remove the cotter pins by pulling the rings with their teeth. At a signal from Salty they both leaped up. At least one machine gun immediately picked them up from some covering source. George fell with a nick in his leg. He turned while falling and reached for the top of the sand bank with two fists full of live grenades. Willy grabbed him by the wrists and helped him back over, watching numbly to see that he did not release the grenade levers. George held the grenades tightly, and when Willy looked out again he saw Salty lying beside the closest bunker, apparently hit. But suddenly Salty crouched and slipped his two grenades into the embrasure beside a stuttering machine gun. He was halfway to the sand bank before the detonations. He slid down in a cloud of sand.

"Those slimy, no-good, mother-raping, yellow-bellied little suckers," he said as the dust settled. More of it sprayed up from bullets hitting the other side of the bank. "You all right, George?"

"Take these," George said. He held out his hands. Salty took the grenades and tossed them over the bank in disgust. "As helpful as peanuts," he said. And after the two blasts, "Let's get out of here."

They crept back through the metal tunnel behind George who had to drag his left leg. In the old machine-gun nest they bandaged it. There was a lot of blood, but the wound was not bad. Willy sprinkled sulfa powder on it, and when Salty applied a battle dressing he unconsciously tied a neat bow as on a shoelace. Before they finished, a skinny sergeant crawled up. Several men followed him at discreet intervals. The last one carried a twin-cylindrical flame thrower on his back.

"Can we get to them pillboxes?" the sergeant asked.

"It won't be easy," Salty said. "Maybe we got one."

"We gotta get 'em all," the sergeant said. "They're murderin' those guys in the water, and one company's on a push across the airport."

"Okay," Salty said. He rubbed his eyes. "Let's go."

"You show this team where," the sergeant told him. "I'll take these two extra men to pack ammo for the airport deal."

"I can't walk," George said.

"Lucky boy. Maybe you'll get evacuated some day." The sergeant jerked his head toward Willy. "Come on, fellow."

Willy looked at Salty. He did not want to leave him. He had found no one else to trust and did not know what the airport involved.

"I'd rather help here," he said. Salty winked and shrugged.

"Enough men here," the sergeant said.

"Go ahead, Chick," Salty told him. "I'll meet you over there."

So Willy followed the sergeant, squirming and crawling to the left and then inland, but he did not like it. They passed several bodies, marine and Jap, and saw no live troops. He thought the buck-ass sergeant was lost, and he was afraid again in unknown territory. They went through a grove of beaten palms toward an open taxiway angling off the main airstrip that ran the length of the island. Willy realized the amount of fire sweeping this taxiway and stopped, but the sergeant motioned him on. There was a high wall of coconut logs just this side of it, and in that shelter they joined three more men around a pile of machine-gun ammunition in wooden boxes. He did not know any of these men.

"Did they get across?" the sergeant asked.

"Yeah," one fellow answered in a tight voice. "They're on the other side if they're still alive. It's murder out there."

"No doubt." The sergeant took the strap of a box in each hand. "So watch where I land and follow me across one at a time."

He leaped up and ran, sprinting low onto the concrete taxiway. You seemed to hear a dozen guns increase the withering fire along that strip. There were no holes to take cover in until you reached the other side, and there was no visible goal then except sand and the stripped boles of a few palms. The sergeant disappeared across the taxiway, and in a moment his arm reappeared to motion the next man out.

Willy looked at the three men beside him. They were crouched

with their rifles slung, their eyes staring straight ahead, not moving. His guts shrank. Beyond the sergeant nothing proved the presence of friendly troops, and the island faded away into the sparkle of the sea again. Such a tiny damned island. Yesterday he had waded through water to its vicious shore, and today he must cross over it to the water again. You could only take so much of its deadly fire, and you would like to gain something more than stinking sand. Was Tarawa worth the life of Andrew Willy?

Then he rose and ran and did not notice until he was on the taxiway, running without a sensation of running, that another man had also risen and run at the same moment and was close beside him screaming for him to spread out. Willy zigzagged desperately for the point where the sergeant had disappeared, and when he got there he was alone. He slid into a shell hole beside the sergeant, and when he could breathe again he looked back and saw that other man fallen in the center of the taxiway, twitching on his face with his arms flung forward. Another man appeared on the far side and ran toward the fallen figure. When he got there he paused to set down an ammo box, grab the fallen man under one arm, and start dragging him forward, too slowly, until he too was hit and they both sank down together, jumping as Mr. Moto had, then lying motionless.

"Oh Christ," the sergeant said. He had one hand clenched on Willy's arm, and he beat the sand impotently with his free fist.

The other fellow began his run, swinging wide around dead comrades, his face distorted with strain and growing more distinct as it approached until it was on top of them and the man fell sobbing into the hole beside Willy. The sergeant patted him on the back and let him get his breath, but all three were still panting when they started on through pock-marked sand to the wider openness of the main airstrip. Beyond it was nothing but sand and sea and broken palms. The sand was mounded into barely visible bunkers for Jap guns, the sea dotted with obstacles, and it was like yesterday when you were shot at without finding anything to shoot back at. And it isn't worth it, Willy thought.

But when the sergeant again said follow me, when he again

jumped up and ran an interminable time through the unseen sweep of bullets and disappeared into a hole between two indistinct bunkers on the far side of the airstrip, Willy again rose and ran after him. He reached a nest of marines surrounded by furious dug-in Nips, and the third man came gasping in after him. They delivered six boxes of ammo to the crew of a heavy machine gun trying to hold its own, then went back for more. They went back across the airstrip, the taxiway, past the log wall, and to the landing beaches, a long hot haul that left their dungarees slimy with sweat but no blood.

Snipers picked at the beach from time to time, and all at once a Jap mortar lobbed shells into it. In the confusion Willy got separated from the sergeant and the other man. He took cover from the mortar, burrowing down against his buttons, and when the shells stopped he sat up and saw a guy nearby moaning softly with his shoulder torn open. Another fellow was trying to move him back to an aid station, and Willy went to help. When he returned to look for his companions he did not see them, and he sat down with a feeling of great weariness and relief.

He could quit now. He lit a cigarette from the ration pack of four that Salty had given him last night and looked along the beach at dead, wounded, and living scattered everywhere. Doctors and corpsmen were working over men in the sand and debris and strewn gear. Some supplies had gotten ashore somehow, and a thin thread of organized supply and command was beginning to show in the confusion. But he saw nobody familiar. He could sit right there all day, as many seemed to be doing, taking a chance on snipers or mortars rather than heavier fire.

It would be so simple to quit. No one in the isolated pocket of marines across the airport knew him. If he did not return they would think he had been killed, a logical conclusion. And here they would think him wounded or shell-shocked, if anyone noticed him at all. He might even go look for Salty Jones again, except that he might find him dead. You had to give up dependence on the living as long as combat might snatch the prop of friendship away under your very eyes. The best thing to do was rest and take

stock of the mayhem, and maybe with the island breached clear across the battle would soon end.

"Why don't you get down?" someone asked. He glanced around and saw a baby-faced kid lying on his side in a shallow hole.

"No need to," he said.

"You'll draw fire," the kid told him shrilly. Willy stared at him. He did not believe he had ever been that scared. He did not believe he was scared at all now. The big smothering fear seemed to have been absorbed into his muscles as a kind of reflex that only drew him down when necessary. Courage seemed to be not a lack of fear but an ability to carry on in spite of it. This kid had gone overboard completely.

"Relax," Willy said. "The beach is nearly secure today."

"Oh hell," the kid said. "Look." Without raising up he pointed to the flats beyond the beach. The tide was out, and dozens of bodies lay there. "Mowed down like wheat this morning. All my buddies."

"It was worse yesterday," Willy told him. He wondered which bodies might be Klein and Fischer, or the driver and relief driver. They all looked alike. He could not even tell which of the wrecked amtracs he had been in. "And it's still worse up ahead."

"But what's the sense?" the kid asked. "Everybody dying that way?"

"For god's sake," Willy said. "Don't flip your lid."

"Well who wouldn't? Who are you to talk?"

"At least I've been across the island." Willy felt scornful and knew he should not. By rights he should feel pity for this kid and all the wounded, but he stared unmoved at raw flesh and bodies freshly dead. He tried to work loose in himself a proper sadness or flood of tears, thinking I never saw this before, I never saw anything like it. Yet nothing came except numb recognition and bitterness.

"You're crazy," the kid said. "You're just asking for it."

"Somebody's got to do it."

"Why? Let the Japs have the goddamn island."

"Oh for god's sake." Willy jabbed his cigarette into the sand

and stood up. It was no conscious call of duty, but he would take his chance with hard-pressed marines hanging onto the other side of the island by the skin of their teeth. He could not quit as this kid was doing. He felt a rough and compelling pride about being able to cross the island, a grim anger that he should be forced to cross it, and an edgy knowledge that other unwilling humans like himself were stubborn enough to do it, or brave enough, or numb enough without being dead. "You're chicken-shit," he told the kid. "Get up from there and help pack ammo."

"Leave me alone," the kid said. "I'm warning you."

"Don't worry. I won't force you."

Willy slung his rifle and walked away. He headed for a row of five-gallon water cans and a pile of ammo crates beside the sea wall. He drank as much as he could of foul tepid water brought ashore in containers tasting of paint, then took a couple of salt tablets and filled his canteens and started to pick up two boxes of machine-gun ammo.

"Where you takin' them, mate?" a supply sergeant asked. He sat protectively on a box at the end of the dump.

"Across the airport," Willy said. "I forgot my requisition."

The supply sergeant rubbed his knees and avoided Willy's eyes.

"Okay," he said. "Good luck."

Willy tried to run across the taxiway, but he was too tired. He used the pair of bodies for a landmark and merely dogtrotted across with a feeling that everything had become unreal. His ears rang as though they were a sounding board for all his jangled nerves. His eyes jangled too, breaking the scene into an improbable streakedness like a poorly projected movie. His body was just a parched and dehydrated husk for a brittle core of consciousness, and he no longer cared if he got hit.

But somehow, by bending low and weaving along, he made it to the center of the airfield. He rested, then trotting on across the main strip he grew oddly aware of dog tags slapping his chest. He was 525271, a numbered mechanism activated by obscure necessity to go on lugging ammo until he dropped. He was a thing with a serial number like a car motor, and in case he turned

in for repairs his dog tags included a blood type. There was also a P to designate religion, on the off-chance that he was more than a mechanism. But whatever his make and model he must be fairly good, because he came in safe again. What would Lt. Coble say about that? *You don't have anything it takes to be a marine, Willy.* Well, a live marine seemed the best marine in a pinch.

Some of the filthy gun crew turned in their holes to watch him approach. They watched him with the same vacant battle stare he had seen in the fellow with the pistol who had welcomed him ashore. They watched dispassionately as he crept the last few yards on elbows and knees, and he knew they would hardly flinch if he got hit. But he crawled in beside them and lay flat until he stopped panting.

It was hot there from more than smoke-glazed sun. Fire and answering fire pounded in his ears. Naval gunfire sounded closer than it did on the landing beaches, and bursts of it were visible to the right. But he was in no hurry to leave. He smoked another cigarette, distributed water, and saw the heavy machine gun eat up belt after belt of ammo. He looked for tangible results of the firing but could see only sand and bunkers and the ocean stretching homeward. Finally he started back over his treadmill to the beach. He made trips like that all day long.

Then in the evening he met two amtracs at the center of the airport. They were loaded with water, rations, and ammo, and were looking for the advanced line he had been helping supply. He almost resented their huge capacity after his puny efforts, but he showed them where to go and realized that the situation must be better if they dared cross the island. Then he settled down for the night in a hole with two of the machine-gun crew. He even ate part of a K ration, surprised that his stomach accepted food and that he enjoyed the taste of it. But he did not sleep. He wanted to. He tried to. The Japs had a fine chance to annihilate this pocket of marines, but he did not care. He was so tired that he would have welcomed oblivion. Death was only one version of it. Yet nothing happened, and his consciousness refused to be shut off after having been kept active so long. It went on reeling out

in memory the dingy movie it had been showing for two days now. It did not stop as readily as his body stopped, and if he slept at all it did not seem like sleep. He simply endured another night.

And when the sun came up he was nauseated by the stench of decaying dead. He had not thought anything could stink like that. It saturated the air until breathing became a dependence on the dead. It did its best to stifle in the living any desire to continue killing, but the slaughter went on. Friendly planes returned to strike and wait on station for further strikes. Artillery had gotten ashore and was pounding at strong points. Mortars and machine guns and rifles splashed and chattered over the stinking sand. There was a fury of attack preparation as Private Willy gathered his remaining strength together for another trip to the beach. But the sergeant who had first led him here stopped him.

"We don't need any more stuff," he said. He was barely recognizable, as if their first meeting yesterday morning had been several years ago. He called to the rest of the machine-gun crew. "Stand by for relief troops to establish contact. Hold your fire unless it's called for."

Willy sank back in his hole. Now that he did not have to move he did not believe he could have. His arms and legs ached. His eyes were scorched and gritty, his mouth was burned dry, his lips were cracked. The stink in his nostrils made him try to breathe through his mouth, but he could always smell it. He lay half asleep in his hot hole until someone shook his arm. It was the sergeant again.

"Come on, fellow," he said. "They want a patrol to go forward and meet those friendly troops. We're it."

Willy and the sergeant and three other men crawled forward. They hardly covered fifty yards before a Jap machine gun held them up. The sergeant spread them out and told them to wait. In the distance they could see tanks and marines moving methodically toward them. They did not move fast, but they cleared Jap pill-boxes carefully with TNT, nitrostarch, bangalore torpedoes, grenades, flame throwers, and tank cannons. It was an organized attack such as had been planned to follow the landing immedi-

ately, and with tanks ashore you would have expected the Japs to understand that they were beaten and to come out with their hands up. Yet they fought on and on with no quarter given and had to be blasted or burned out, unless they committed suicide first. It was a maddening extermination of perfectly real men who had fought and lost but would not quit. The only good thing about it was that maybe in a little while it would be over and you could sleep and sleep and sleep.

A light tank close to the airport sidled up to the vent of a pillbox not far ahead of the patrol and fired point-blank into it while men sneaked around to the side and got a charge ready to slip in. After the blast a flame thrower gave it a squirt, and that was one pillbox less.

The sergeant raised up and waved. No Jap fire challenged him. A man from the other group came forward, his rifle ready. Something in his movement caught Willy's attention. Something in the appearance of the following men made Willy sit up. He had grown so used to strangers that he had thought no familiar faces would emerge from this carnage. The dirt and whiskers of strangers seemed natural to the situation, and it did not matter a great deal when they dropped dead. But now almost with regret he recognized his own platoon advancing.

"Hey," he said to the sergeant. "That's my outfit."

"Well God bless 'em," the sergeant said. He sat back and closed his eyes. "God bless you too, kid. God bless every poor bastard here."

"Yeah." Willy stood up stiffly. "So long, sarge." He strolled out to meet Clay Gosse and could not help wondering why Gosse should still be alive. If there had been justice in the selection of men to die it would surely not have been Gosse approaching at the point of the patrol, his tight skin covered with sweat and dust, his rifle ready in case Willy was a Jap in disguise. Gosse was trigger-happy and wary.

"For chrissake," he said. "Willy?"

"Yeah," Willy said. "Aim your rifle somewhere else."

"Well godalmighty. Never expected to see you again."

"You weren't alone." Lt. McGhee came up to them with his carbine at the ready. "Hi, Lieutenant," Willy said.

"Well I'll be damned," the lieutenant said. His voice sounded old and flat. Everybody spoke as if they should all be dead. Nobody smiled, and it was a little embarrassing to find the lieutenant so dirty and unshaven when he was usually so spruce and decent. He shook Willy's hand.

"Glad to see you, fellow. How in hell did you get over here?"

"It wasn't easy," Willy said. "We pushed across yesterday."

"God." The lieutenant looked around dully. "Rugged?"

"Pretty rugged, Mr. McGhee."

"We sort of threw you to the lions, Willy. We didn't even get ashore till yesterday. Had to land on another beach. Where's Klein and Fischer?"

"Dead, I guess."

"Oh." The lieutenant's hands tightened on his carbine. He glanced along the attacking line. "Well. Better keep going. Want to take the point from Gosse and lead us through this breach to more hot stuff?"

"Yessir," Willy said. "I guess so."

He did not want to be the point or anything at all. He felt exhausted, but it was not quite finished yet. For the rest of the day he walked through the sand with a tank following him like a pet pachyderm. When he got shot at he flopped down from the reflex of fear in his muscle and motioned the tank forward on a clear course. By making himself a target he searched out remaining fortifications, and when one was located the tank kept it inactive until flame throwers reduced it. You could hear shrieks and groans and popping bullets after a squirt of flame into an embrasure, but those popping bullets inside made a better sound than whining ricochets outside. And then Willy discovered an interesting fact: the smell of burning human flesh was a sweet smell and a welcome change from the cloying stink of bodies putrefying in the sun.

But good god, he thought as he lay flat on his belly and watched another bunker being gutted by flames. What have you become

when the smell of burning flesh is preferable to everything else you smell?

5

At twilight the platoon withdrew back across the airport to rejoin its regular company. Lt. McGhee bivouacked his men in a long tank trap to save digging foxholes, and Willy sat at one end of it with Leeper and Bonelli. Leeper looked gaunt, as though he had lost more than weight. His lips were cracked and raw with fever blisters, and he did not touch the can of cheese on his knee. Bonelli ate with good appetite but seemed worn internally.

"The sonsabitches," he said. "The little yellow sonsabitches."

"Who all got killed?" Willy asked. His cheese tasted good with dry crackers dipped in cold coffee made from a packet of coffee powder. He was hungry but wanted to tell over the dead while he had a chance. It was the least you could do for them.

"Chick Woodruff got it," Leeper said.

"Did he?" For a moment Willy was surprised. Chick Woodruff, veteran of Gavutu, Tulagi, and Guadalcanal; married on New Zealand, dead on Tarawa. Now they could never laugh together about Leeper's getting seasick on the way in. Why not Clay Gosse instead? How had anyone survived? Willy took a bite of cheese. "I saw Fischer and Klein get it," he said.

"And Lefty Eads and Jack Halley," Bonelli said. "But that son of a bitch Sergeant Barnard didn't even get out of the boat. Got a piece of shrapnel in his arm and went back to the ship. Can you imagine?"

"Dream wound." Willy finished his coffee.

"Chick sat up to put on a clean pair of socks," Leeper said. He fiddled with the can of cheese on his knee, not eating. "I told him to keep down because our hole wasn't very deep, but he said he'd change his socks, Japs or no Japs. Remember how he called 'em Japes?"

"Easy, Leeper," Bonelli said. "It happened, that's all."

"Well Jesus. You didn't see him. The poor guy just fell over

with a bullet through his head. Right at the top of his neck, just below his helmet. Christ. All on accounta he had to have clean socks."

"I shot a Jap something like that," Willy said and then wished he had not. Leeper turned and threw his can of cheese out of the tank trap. Afterward he sat with his head on his knees until it got dark. He just sat there without crying, and you did not know what to say.

Bonelli offered Willy half his poncho to lie on, but there was nothing except sand under it so neither of them went to sleep easily. Pack howitzers nearby banged away at the east end of the island, and occasionally a rattle of heavy fire fighting came from down there. Apparently the last concentration of Japs was counter-attacking. It might have been serious the first night or last night, but it was not now. When Willy got used to the howitzers' noise his mind gave up. He slept. Not deeply or satisfactorily, but enough to know he had been asleep when a siren wailed out of the night. He heard Bonelli cussing and wondered what it was. The howitzers had stopped firing, and then he heard Washing-Machine Charlie in the sky again. He rolled onto his stomach and waited for the inevitable, infuriating, futile stick of bombs. They shook sand down on his helmet, then he dozed until dawn when it was necessary to move and stay awake once more. Bonelli stood up beside him, sagging.

"Those sonsabitches," he said. "Those bastardly little fanatics."

"Another day," Willy said. "Another dollar."

"I haven't even had a bowel movement since we landed." Bonelli sounded very clinical, as if it had nothing to do with him.

"Maybe we sweat it out," Willy said. He snapped the cartridge belt around his bruised waist and decided the human body could take a lot of punishment even though it could be killed very easily too.

They ate another K ration for breakfast and began mopping up around the airport. It was abnormally quiet. The Japs were hopelessly beaten, yet once in a while an insistent sniper picked at them for the glory of the emperor from a hidden hole or charred

ruins. Muffled blasts of TNT, black clouds of flame-thrower smoke, a rifle discharge, searched for the nuisance. But no heavy explosions from aerial bombs or ships' shells shook the island. No streams of bullets crisscrossed the putrid air. You dropped for protection only when a stray shot came especially close.

Dead lay everywhere, hundreds of them, thousands of them. Marines and Japs sprawled where they had fallen, and you could hardly tell one from the other. They were equally dead and smelled alike. All had bloated in the sun, swelled their clothing tight, and begun to reek of putrefaction. Their hands and faces were swollen and blackened as if seared by dark flame, but sometimes you could distinguish nationality by circumstantial evidence. Great numbers of dismembered and partly dis clothed corpses around bunkers and mouths of holes were always Japs. Corpses with their faces blown off were always suicide Japs. Pieces of equipment or undiscolored dungaree identified marines, and they were usually found singly. Some lay straight and stiff as boards. Others lay on their faces with hands and rears stiffened off the ground. A few had palm fronds spread over them, the gesture of a friend.

Willy plodded with his platoon through heat and stink and ruin. He kicked at a pile of clothing and papers. A photograph fell beside a split-toed shoe. He picked it up, glanced at a slant-eyed woman, and tossed it away. He stepped around an unexploded shell, went around several more dead, and stopped to stare at a demolished building that might still hide one live Jap with one live round left in his rifle. When no shot came he stared down at another corpse near his feet. It was a marine, a buck sergeant with faded chevrons painted on his sleeve. Across his back was stenciled a name—Potter. Willy remembered Fritz Potter, the decontamination sergeant who had called him baby and told him about combat. Could you recognize the faces of dead buddies?

His platoon had moved on, and he was hidden by a mounded air-raid shelter. He bent to look at the face of this Potter. It was against the sand. He felt no real pity yet hesitated to touch the body. He had been hardened, but it was not a satisfying hardness. It was mostly a scab of bitterness and exhaustion that did not pro-

tect him all the way through. Would total hardness come by looking squarely at death?

He reached down quickly and lifted the body by its shoulder. He felt skin break beneath the dungarees. A bloated face came off the sand like a piece of soft garbage, then a gust of stench worse than sewer gas made him gag and retch dryly and spin away gasping to lean on his rifle while his stomach constricted spastically.

If it had been Fritz Potter it was not now. None of them were anyone he knew, because with life gone they were merely refuse. Soul? No, life—whatever it was. Souls and heaven were wishful thinking. Life went the same place that the flame of a candle went when you blew it out, leaving unused wax and string. The pity was that you should gather nicely lit candles together and make a contest of blowing them out before they burned down. *It's depraved, baby. . . . You begin to feel like a soft brown smear of it right under your own nose. . . .* He wished he could escape it, but he already had forgotten what fresh air smelled like and could only hate the rotten filthiness of calculated slaughter.

They were still patrolling in the afternoon when word was passed that the Commanding General had declared the island secure. A few jeeps rattled through the debris, and bulldozers started work on the airstrip. One of them pushed rubble and sand over some of the Jap bodies, then turned to dig another pit for marine bodies being laboriously gathered into ponchos or shoved onto boards by burial parties. When night came it was easier to sleep, until Washing-Machine Charlie flew over again. Willy felt a pissiness of fear in his bladder before the stick of bombs fell, but afterward a stream of tracers floated up from the beach in search of the plane and he hoped it would be shot down. The baling-wire drone faded away unharmed, then there was complete silence once more

In the morning it was all over, almost too soon, as if something had been omitted—comprehension perhaps. Combat units gathered for muster and shuffled off remnant by remnant to the landmark pier. Today crates and boxes and salvaged gear were stacked high along it, and roller lines carried food and equipment along it

to shore. Pale swollen bodies bobbed beside it in dirty water, and among the supplies lay other bodies covered by ponchos. It was a very long pier, but it had been wholly captured with its attached island, and now at the end of it Higgins boats circled by the dozens to pick up troops so recently put ashore.

Willy stood beside Leeper and looked back. This had been combat; this was victory. Through battered palms he could see water on the other side of Betio. Not even blood had dissolved that miserable strip of sand back into its parent sea, and an intolerable filth of slaughtered flesh choked his lungs. He loathed it. He hated himself for ever having been ignorant enough to want to see battle, for having renounced childhood to be a man. If this was what men did, he wanted the womb again.

He felt weak and had to sit down. His ears rang as if they had been covered by two seashells echoing the rage of these past days. His eyes stung like raw cuts, and he ached with fatigue. He sat on a pile of ration boxes and rubbed his forehead and thought he would pass out. One more breath of Diesel exhaust and salt water and hot decay and he would simply choke out like a flame lacking oxygen.

"Willy," Leeper said. "Come on. We're loading."

"Where for?" he said. "What other island?"

"Snap it up," Lt. McGhee called.

Willy raised his head and saw the platoon piling into a boat. The motion of it nearly made him seasick where he sat. Then he picked up the rifle he had taken from the first dead marine he had seen on Tarawa, stood up, and forced himself to walk to the edge of the pier where Leeper was standing. He put his hand on Leeper's shoulder, but it felt slimy with sweat and reminded him of the corpse he had tried to lift. All flesh seemed somehow contaminated, and he dropped his hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry as hell, Bony."

"What for?"

"For making you enlist. For everything."

"It's done, Andy. We made it, and tomorrow's Thanksgiving."

"Thanksgiving?" Willy said. "Who believes in that crud any more?"

Fate gives the wound, and man is born to bear.

chapter 3

1

The body has its limits, and even Private Willy slept. He had been posted as a guard in the forward troop compartment, but the ship's movement and heat and droning blowers overcame all opposition to sleep. He sat on the deck at the foot of a ladder, his shoulders braced against someone's feet. His helmet rocked back and forth on the deck beside him.

"Guard," said a voice above him. "Guard."

Private Willy tried to raise his eyelids, but it seemed better to leave them down and prevent any sort of unpleasantness from starting again. He was sweating. It was sticky hot, and already he smelled a reminder of what he particularly wanted to forget.

"Private Willy," the voice said. "It's the OD."

Then he did lift his eyelids, and sure enough, Lt. Coble stood in front of a dim red light that barely illuminated anything.

"Oh," Willy said. He reached for his helmet but remembered that Lt. Coble was dead. He was dreaming, so he closed his eyes.

"Willy, for god's sake report your post."

Once more he opened his eyes, and this time he realized that it was not Lt. Coble but Lt. McGhee standing over him. He said

"Oh" again, remembering guard duty and the necessity for keeping his eyes open. He began pulling himself up from the deck by a stanchion at the end of the tier of bunks, reporting his post as he rose.

"Post one, all secure, sir." Then he had to bend down to get his helmet in order to put it on and salute properly covered.

"Can't you stay awake?" Lt. McGhee asked after returning the salute.

"It's pretty hard," Willy said. He focused his eyes on the lieutenant and finally recalled the matter of discipline. "Yessir. I just sat down for a minute, sir. I wasn't asleep or anything."

"I know it's hard." The lieutenant's voice was hoarse with weariness. He was tired too. Lieutenants are people after all. "But you're on guard, Willy. You've got to."

"Yessir, Lieutenant."

"They shouldn't have us on duty tonight, but they do."

"Of course, sir."

"I can't wake up every post every five minutes."

"Nosir. But it's hot down here, Mr. McGhee."

"It's hot topside too."

"Yessir."

"We can't let the ship's guard catch us doping off."

"Nosir."

"Oh balls." The lieutenant wiped his forehead and rubbed his eyes. "Do the best you can, Willy. At least God got us here for Thanksgiving."

"Do you still believe in God, Lieutenant?"

Mr. McGhee looked at him as though trying to recollect which page of the Marine Corps Manual might deal with this question. He swayed against the light for a long moment in silence.

"I suppose so," he said at last. "I always have, and I'm too damn tired tonight to consider alternatives. Carry on, Willy."

"Yessir."

They saluted, and Lt. McGhee turned to climb the ladder slowly, clumsily, pulling himself up by the handrail. Yessir, Willy thought. Today the island, tonight the ship, and nothing in be-

tween yet. Maybe there never would be anything in between. He reached down to pick up his helmet, but it was already on his head and nearly fell off. He straightened up and moved through the hot compartment.

There was nothing to guard except a lot of naked marines sweating in their sleep. An awful lot of dirty male flesh lay exposed there and smelled to high heaven, especially the feet. More smell came from the head abaft. Blowers could not change the air fast enough, and the stink reminded him of the island, although not exactly. Bad as it was, he preferred this. He preferred these live ones whose limp parts might some day work again if bruised bodies ever got around to generating the necessary passion, if passion still existed. Whole flesh, even very dirty flesh, was preferable to Tarawa's carrion. Most of this flesh was whole anyway. Here and there he saw a patch of adhesive tape or gauze bandage, but nothing serious. Nothing physically serious.

Private Willy made an aimless tour of duty among closely stacked sleeping ones, then went into the head. The smell was not much worse there. He lit a cigarette, sat down on a crapper, and promptly fell asleep once more.

2

Twice there were funerals. Bodies in canvas slid quickly overboard, splashed, sank, and were gone forever without a trace.

The ship was crowded. Not all transports had been able to leave Tarawa, so troops had gone aboard any ship handy. Wounded filled most bunks, and even on weather decks space was scarce. Private Willy built himself a shelter of crates near the incinerator on the fantail. Other men did not like it with the garbage and did not move in on him every time he went to take a leak. When he had tried to sack down further forward he had always come back to find his gear stacked in a new spot with no room for him to stretch out in, a bigger harder marine asleep where he had left his cartridge belt, helmet, poncho, and rifle—his only gear now. He did not even have a toothbrush, because it was in his pack in

the amtrac offshore at Tarawa. The ship's small stores had sold all their toothbrushes before he got the word, yet few things are really necessary when you reach the bare core of living.

Sometimes a sailor yelled at him to get the hell off the fantail, but when he blinked bloodshot blue eyes at them they let him be. The police sergeant never found him there either after that hateful voice on the loud-speakers blatted, "Sweepers, man your brooms. Clean sweep-down, fore and aft." At night he could see the Southern Cross above one horizon and the Big Dipper above the other. Once in a while during the day Leeper came to see him, but Leeper could not sit quietly for long without its becoming unbearable. He did not dare remember anything and soon went forward to find a card game where he could concentrate on meaningless numbers instead of meaningful memories. For the most part Private Willy was alone under vegetable crates rigged to keep the sun off his head, just resting. When not asleep he watched steamy clouds bob up and down over the wake of the ship, trembling slightly with the grind of the screw in the water beneath him, sweating endlessly in the humid heat, and fighting and refighting the battle just fought.

He did not try to fight the battle again, or to stop. It was simply there—all of it, from battleship salvos before daylight to dead fish in the lagoon and dead marines in the sand. It was over and done with, yet it echoed on and on in his mind like a confined sound in a limited space. It was over but came to nothing he could do anything with. There was no comfort to it, no fulfillment. Loose ends hung around him like the ragged dungaree cuffs around his legs. What had become of the wounded driver and relief driver? What had become of the scared kid on the beach who asked what sense it made? Where were the men he had packed ammo to? Where were Salty and George? He would have liked to talk it over with Salty, but Salty was not aboard this ship. So who could tell you what sense it made? Had it actually resolved anything besides a lot of lives?

He did try to think of the campaign as an item in history, as one battle among many, the opening of war in the Central Pacific.

But always there came back the immediate and particular explosions and confusion and fear of his own personal, irreparably non-historic, knowledge of that deadly island. He could not even decide whether he had done his best since no one told him he had been fine in this instance but should have done thus and so in that case. He had not been an unflinching hero, yet he hoped he had been more adequate than his brothers might have been. Who passed judgment and paid you off?

No, there was nothing satisfactory about it. You might never outlive its numbing pact. You fought—if fighting was shooting at the unseen and being shot back at by the same, fearing long-range violence rather than individual opponents—then came aboard ship to sleep with the garbage because there was no bunk for you. You had nothing to show for your effort and could not even wash off the grime since the ship was unable to make fresh water fast enough. You merely stared back across the senseless ocean and wondered when you would not feel tired again, where you were going now, and how many islands there were in the Pacific. There was little hope when you considered that.

"Hey, boy." He recognized the nasal voice and looked up to see Lt. Kocopy standing above him with a professional frown. The lieutenant wore a duty belt and clean blue sailor's dungarees

"Yessir?" Willy sat up.

"You know you're off limits. Now move forward."

"Yessir." Willy put on his helmet and stood up.

"Tear down that shack too. This ain't shantytown."

"Nosir." Private Willy slowly began to stack his crates on the pile of garbage. The lieutenant rubbed his damaged nose, sighed, and walked away. When he was out of sight Private Willy patiently took the crates and built his shelter again.

You have to be some place, he thought.

3

The chow line barely moved. It was hot, and you felt no hunger, but it was necessary to eat so you shuffled along and eventually got

there. At the foot of the ladder an assistant master at arms told you off about nothing in particular. The crap he gave you sort of fit the pattern and rounded out the day.

The mess hall was stifling. Natural heat, galley steam, food smells, grease, and sweat were so thick that you could almost pinch off a sample of air and rub it between your fingertips like an oily scum. But Private Willy was a good sailor and did not mind too much. That evening the meal even looked fairly appetizing; meat loaf with lots of ketchup, string beans, cole slaw, and melting red Jello. He took his tray and leaned against the slimy wet bulkhead while waiting for a place at the high tables you had to stand up to. Once he found a place he knew he could stay there as long as he could still eat. Even though he was small and had few whiskers, nobody bothered him at chow.

He moved in beside a tall thin corporal with a bony face and rather green skin. The corporal toyed with his food and stared at the bulkhead. He was not eating anything at all but for some reason stayed there, as though he had given up caring where he was. Private Willy felt uneasy beside him. It did no good to take things so hard, and an NCO especially should not be so shaken. Somebody had to keep up appearances.

Willy ate his meat loaf and cole slaw and remembered how he had eaten a K ration on the beach while a dead marine bobbed in the waves a few feet away and nobody had gone to fish him out because everybody was too tired and there were too many dead marines in the water and too many live Japs still in the bunkers. Maybe this corporal had also been there. Maybe that corpse had been his buddy and he was thinking of it now. Such things happen.

With cautious curiosity Private Willy glanced sideways at the corporal again. Just then the corporal started to vomit into his tray. Willy stepped back and watched yellow vomit spurt into the meat loaf and green beans and red Jello. When it was over the corporal hung his head and held onto the high table with both hands, shivering.

"What's the matter, mate?" Private Willy asked.

The corporal swallowed, his eyes closed, his breathing ragged.

"Malaria," he said after a moment.

Oh dammit, dammit, Willy thought. You don't have a chance.

4

Rain squalls blurred patches of hot sunny hills as their ship wound through the channels of Pearl Harbor and docked. It was December 7, but it could have been July, 14 for all anyone cared about dates.

Troops crowded the port rail in hopes of finding something in Hawaii to make them forget Tarawa, but there were only a few longshoremen working in an open warehouse across a long wharf. The ship's executive officer bawled through loud-speakers for all marines to lay below before the ship listed too dangerously, but marines stayed where they were and no one did anything more about it.

Ambulances came for the wounded, but there were no women nurses so the transfer of patients from the ship was merely painful to watch. After the ambulances had gone a marine band marched onto the dock. Their starched khaki with neat field scarves looked like something artificial on a recruiting poster, and raggedy-ass marines aboard ship hooted and jeered. When the music began it sounded inappropriate but remarkably clean, like the starched khaki uniforms. Raggedy-ass marines cheered a little after each number, but it was less spirit than sound. The band played for about an hour, then marched smartly away.

Suddenly the ship listed worse than ever to port. Two dark girls had appeared at the end of the wharf. They were wearing very bright dresses that seemed impossibly fresh and beautiful. The men whistled and shouted and paid no attention to the ship's executive officer bawling again through loud-speakers about the danger of capsizing the ship. The girls talked together, then walked off.

In a little while they returned with three other girls and big paper sacks full of candy bars and gum. The shipboard marines cheered wildly, then booed a pair of shore patrolmen who came to send the girls back. Finally the SPs were persuaded to let them

stay, and the five dark-skinned natives came close alongside the ship. Their bright skirts blew thighward in squally breezes, and they grinned at each other as they tried to hold them down without spilling the sacks of gifts.

They threw packages of gum and candy toward the deck, but it was too high for their awkward pitches. Stevedores left their work and came to help. Marines scrambled for the candy bars and gum simply because of its source. They threw down souvenir Jap money in return. The girls picked it up and waved polite thanks. Then the most enterprising marines began throwing down notes. The girls read these and giggled. One of them sent up her handkerchief to a note writer who let down a heavy line to get it. Several other girls joined the impromptu welcome, and eventually there were a dozen of them.

Private Willy was on the wharf all that time, but not with the women. He was in a work detail with thirty other men. When they first heard excited shouts from the ship, the whole working party dropped their boxes and ran to see what was going on. The sergeant and lieutenant in charge maneuvered like a pair of sheep dogs to round up the scattered detail and keep it on the job.

But there were only so many boxes ready to be moved from one pile to another until the longshoremen were able to haul out the next pile. The sweating sergeant checked to make sure, then gave the men a break.

"Crap out," he said. "But don't go near them dames."

Private Willy found a pile of cargo nets in the shade between two rows of crated field galleys. He laid down by himself, facing the midship portion of the railing where marines were watching the pier, but he did not see any of the girls until one of them walked around the corner to where he was. She was adjusting something under the blouse of her dress. When he sat up startled, her black eyes widened in surprise. Then she dropped her hands and smiled the sweetest smile in the world.

"Why hello," she said. "I thought you were all up there."

He had forgotten that women's voices were so gentle. He had forgotten that their breasts were so apparent and their waists so

slender and their ankles so delicate. He had been so far from feminine beauty that he felt indecent just looking at it, yet he could not shift his eyes. This girl had pale brown skin and rich red lips and thick black hair. Her wide green skirt was splashed with brilliant yellow flowers, and she wore yellow shoes that emphasized the darkness of her smooth bare legs. She was incredibly lovely, like a fragile toy.

"Hello," he said, and his own voice sounded crude.

"Why don't they all come down?" she asked, pointing to the ship.

"They can't." His tongue seemed swollen at its roots.

"I wish I'd saved some candy for you."

"Oh that's all right."

"We feel very sorry about this. We all work here."

"It's nice of you." He was beginning to feel physically disturbed, as though he were actually touching her and reacting to a direct contact with that fine soft female skin. Never before had he felt such frank desire for a woman in broad daylight. "Do you live near here?"

"Oh yes." She spoke easily with a pleasant little accent, standing in front of him with no self-consciousness whatsoever, as if she expected men to stare quite frankly at things that pleased them. She indicated the end of the pier. "Down the road. Not far from here."

"Wish I could come and see you."

"Maybe some day. My name's Violet."

"My name's Willy."

"It must have been awful for you out there."

"I didn't get wounded or anything."

"I'm glad. But I know it's awful from two years ago here."

"That's right. I forgot about it here."

Because now he was thinking you might make love on a pile of cargo nets. There are times when it seems possible to reach out to a perfect stranger who will understand. Then suddenly his bubble broke.

"Hey!" the sergeant yelled. "Get the hell over here."

Private Willy jumped. For a moment he had been far beyond

working parties and filth and echoes of battle. But he got up automatically and started toward the sergeant. Then he stopped and turned back to Violet. She raised her hand and smiled. The sergeant came up beside Willy, and they both watched Violet turn and walk toward her friends. She walked gracefully and without hurrying, looking around to wave good-by just before she disappeared beyond a high stack of crates.

The sergeant whistled softly.

"Jeez Louise," he said. "Got yourself a shackup?"

"Hell," Willy said. "I forgot to ask her last name."

But for the rest of the day he felt peculiarly giddy. Even while carrying heavy boxes from one pile to another he had frequent and physically disturbing recollections of that specific dark feminine beauty. And each time he remembered her he thought with bewildered pleasure, at least there's that. I may be field stripped, but at least it's there.

*Not thus even for thyself I felt desire,
As now my veins receive the pleasing fire.*

chapter 4

1

They debarked at Hilo on the big island. A convoy of army trucks loaded troops directly from the ship and drove through the outskirts of town into the hills. When the trucks began climbing in low gear most men sat down and quit looking for women, but Bonelli and Clay Gosse leaned stubbornly across the roof of the cab. Suddenly Gosse snatched his helmet from his head.

"Look at that son of a bitch," he said.

Beside the road an old Japanese man with a cane stood among banana trees in front of a little tin-roofed house, watching the convoy pass. Gosse threw his helmet with all his might. It hit the old man's cane, bounced against his leg, and made him fall.

"Tojo eats shit," Gosse yelled furiously.

Private Willy jumped at the shout. He was ready to shoot or hit the deck if a skirmish developed, but when he saw the old Jap fall and realized the situation he felt gutted by hopelessness. Hawaii should not be tainted with battle hatred. He turned to look at Gosse. Bonelli was holding his arms, but the other men in the truck seemed encased in indifference. Private Willy wished he had never been born.

"I'll kill every Jap on this island," Gosse was saying. "I won't live with 'em any more'n I'd live with niggers."

"For chrissake," Bonelli said. "Don't get us all restricted."

The road grew dusty among lava beds, and afterward the country was not green and tropical as Hawaii should be but brown and dry and full of cactus like arid stateside land in the far west. An hour before sunset they stopped high in a saddle north of Mauna Kea. There was no camp. A few pyramidal tents were obviously for officers, and a few scattered shacks looked like galleys or heads. Rocky cactusland sloped westward to the ocean like the curve of the world.

"Oh god," Leeper said. "Is this all we get?"

"It's paradise," Lt. McGhee said. He leaned against the truck, waiting for the men to assemble. His face was dusty, and he looked as tired as the night after Tarawa. "Beautiful Hawaii."

"When's liberty?" Bonelli asked.

"As soon as the hula girls get here."

"No kiddin', Lieutenant."

"Then ask the Army. They're in charge. Maybe we have to be quarantined till we get deodorized. Where's your helmet, Gosse?"

"I lost it," Gosse said. "It rolled off the truck, Lieutenant."

"Tell the quartermaster you lost it in battle." Mr. McGhee straightened up a little. "All right, men. First we draw blankets at the other end of the galley. No cots. No tents. No Cecil Club. But there's chow, if you want to call it chow. Crap out afterwards wherever rocks are softest, and I hope they boil him in oil, whoever planned this."

They ate a mushy hash of half-heated C rations and spread their two blankets on the ground over ponchos. The air grew chilly. The sun went down beyond the ocean, and a line of cloud turned pink and lavender along the crest of Mauna Kea. It was pretty, except that it belonged to other circumstances. Bonelli stared at a row of trees yellowed by the sunset.

"There must be a town over there," he said. "Let's case it."

"Yeah," Willy said. "Maybe Honolulu."

"It don't even have to be Hilo if there's one broad. Let's see."

"Oh hell," Leeper said. "We haven't a chance, Louie."

"There's always a chance." Bonelli hitched his pants up as Chick Woodruff used to, as though he were so hard up he didn't know how tired he was. "Come on before five thousand other guys remember they can do more than leak through it."

"You got a point." Leeper sat on his blankets with his right foot moving up and down as if to a tune he could not forget.

"But we aren't deodorized," Willy said.

"With them big blue eyes you don't need to be," Bonelli told him.

"Oh brother."

"Well how about that hula queen at Pearl. You slayed her."

"Yeah." Willy shook his head. "Big romance. She talked to me."

"He's gonna save it, Louie," Leeper said. "For his gal at home."

"Oh balls." Bonelli rubbed his hand over Willy's hair, like petting a cat. His arrogance seemed toned down by combat, as if he no longer had to be defensive about lechery since he had learned that it was a harmless evil compared to vicious ones. "You can't save it," he said. "It won't collect interest. Come on, guys."

"Okay." Willy stood up. "If we find even a beer we'll be that much ahead."

They walked across the field toward the trees and came to a paved road. It was almost dark then, and the night felt too big and empty and quiet, as though they were walking into an ambush of unfriendly natives. Maybe combat would follow you to any shore now, and even Bonelli seemed wary. But suddenly Willy squeezed his fists in resentment.

Damn the lingering fear. Damn Clay Gosse and his hatred of old men with the features of Japs. God damn conditions that shot your reflexes all to hell. It was a sad day when you grew afraid of any darkness.

"How far we going?" he asked out loud. Leeper jumped.

"Not far," Bonelli said. "I see a light up ahead."

They passed two dark houses before coming to one with a light inside. It looked like a gable-roofed cottage in some stateside

town, but by the light from an open doorway they saw a sign on the porch. It said Kamuela Kafe, like alliterative signs on Kandy Kitchens back in the states. Willy realized that Hawaii was practically part of the states, but he was confused. He wanted to return to days before fear and start all over again to understand the shape of the world and things men shared in common. He wanted to be prepared before he got here, and there must be a science of it. I don't know what, he thought, but I'd like to learn exactly why we live and why we die and why we're worth it.

Bonelli was swearing. There were a lot of voices inside the Kafe.

"We weren't fast enough," he said. "We're the second wave."

"Let's go sack out then," Leeper said.

"Oh what the hell. We're here. Let's check it anyway."

Bonelli went onto the porch, and Willy followed him. They opened the screen door and stepped in, and Leeper stood holding the screen behind them. There was a narrow hallway full of marines in dungarees. Small dining rooms opened off the hallway. Men sat at wooden tables with no food or drink in front of them. At the end of the hallway was a closed door. Four or five marines beat on it with their fists.

"Open up, you bastards," a loud one said. "You got customers."

"Break out the beer before we break you apart."

"The marines have landed, you gook sonsabitches."

"Service, service, service," someone else kept yelling. "We're the Elite Corps goddammit. Let's have some Elite Service."

They were all tired and dirty and frustrated. A marine sitting on the floor in the hall was sound asleep, and next to him sat a kid with a bandaged hand. He had his head against the wall and was nearly asleep too.

"What's the deal?" Bonelli asked him.

"I guess they're Japs," the kid said. "I guess they're scared. They locked theirselves in the kitchen and won't give us nothin'."

"Women?" Bonelli asked.

"The waitress is, and the old Jap's wife. Both beasts."

"Anybody tried the rear door?"

"I dunno. I'm too pooped to care. I'm just waitin' for MPs to

come and give us a ride back to camp. Or maybe the brig. Maybe they got cots in the brig. Maybe it's warm. I never thought Hawayo'd be so friggin' cold. Ain't we the conquerin' heroes though?"

The kid pulled up his knees and put his forehead on them. Other men kept yelling or pounding tables. Nobody would give up. Bonelli turned to Willy and Leeper with a wise grin.

"Let's go around back," he said. "My old man runs a restaurant, and if we got this place organized we'd have it made."

"Oh hell," Leeper said. "Let's go sack out, Louie."

"Jesus, man. Snap out of it." Bonelli hit his shoulder lightly. He was wide awake and full of ideas. He ought to be hitched to a generator, Willy thought. "A flank attack won't cost us anything."

Leeper looked at Willy. Willy shrugged.

"Okay," Leeper said.

They went outside and around the house in the dark. Windows facing seaward had blackout screens, and at first the kitchen looked empty. But beneath the rear door was a crack of light. Bonelli knocked gently.

"Who is it?" a man's voice said inside.

"A marine police detail," Bonelli told him.

"We want no trouble," the man said. "Just ask them to leave."

"Open up," Bonelli said. "You won't have any trouble."

There was a pause and whispering. You felt sorry for them because they had to lock themselves in their own house. Then a key turned in the lock, and a vertical streak of light spilled out. Bonelli stood in it with a smile. He had won a pair of navy dungarees in a crap game and might have looked like a shore patrolman.

"Hello there," he said. "They sent us around to give you a hand."

"Thank you," the old man said. "Please ask them to go away."

"Don't be scared. They're only hungry."

"Then why do they curse and threaten us? We're good citizens."

"It don't mean anything." Bonelli spoke nicely, as if to small children. "They've been cooped up aboard ship and forgot how to act. Let us in and we'll straighten it out for you."

There was more whispering, then the door opened slowly. Willy

saw two women standing beside the stove. One was wrinkled and old and frightened. The other was young and flat-faced and giggling. The old man wore a business suit and horn-rimmed glasses. He bowed as Bonelli entered but stiffened as Willy and Leeper followed in dirty dungarees.

"Atta boy, pop," Bonelli said. He closed the door, locked it, and winked at Willy and Leeper before turning to shake the old man's hand. "I'm the Louie," he said. "We're glad to help you all we can."

The old woman spoke in Japanese, and the old man motioned to a closed door leading to the hall. You could hear rough voices on the other side of it, the scuffling and aimless pounding.

"We're closed," the man said. "Tell them to leave, Lieutenant."

"Aw come on, pop." Bonelli smiled and rubbed his hands together. "They've got money and you've got food, so why not play ball?"

The old man seemed ready to cry.

"Aren't you the police, Lieutenant?"

"Sure we're a police detail. Just call me Louie."

"But you have no arm bands."

"Our stuff's still aboard ship, pop. Everything's snafu. But relax and let us wait tables for you. You'll make a mint."

The old man looked at the old woman and said something bitterly. She shrugged. They were harmless but slant-eyed and yellow-skinned. Willy felt suspicious in spite of himself. If they were Japanese with relatives in Japan you did not know how they might really feel about the war. You had just been killing Japs and seeing buddies killed by them. Yet this was Hawaii. These people said they were good citizens, and maybe they were. Should you forgive them their eyes and skin, or was there nothing to forgive in the first place? Who had invented this hate and suspicion, and where was the end of it?

"We have little food," the old man said. "We have no beer or whisky, because we have no license. We did not expect all these men, Lieutenant, but take what meat and eggs we have and leave us our home."

He pointed to an old-fashioned icebox and stood aside with dignity.

"Let's go, Louie," Leeper said.

"Steady, mate. It's about licked." Bonelli opened the icebox and took inventory. There were dozens of eggs and two dressed chickens.

"Who cooks?" he said. The old Jap pointed to his wife. Bonelli patted her shoulder gently. "Have you got any aprons?" he asked.

The old woman went to a drawer beneath the cupboards and lifted out two clean white aprons like those worn by butchers. Bonelli gave one to Willy and one to Leeper. He was almost exuberant.

"Put 'em on, fellows," he said. "They'll hide your raunchy dungarees, and if you wait table I'll keep everything else under control. We'll roast the chickens for ourselves when we get rid of the customers."

"We'll wind up in the brig," Willy said.

"Oh balls. Not for volunteer mess duty. Let's roll."

Bonelli stepped to the hall door and turned the key. The old man and woman tensed, and the waitress giggled. The marine leaning against the door stumbled in when it was opened, but Bonelli caught him.

"Okay, men. Simmer down." It grew quiet in the hall and small dining rooms. Bonelli put his hands on his hips and talked like a mess sergeant. "This is no slop chute," he said, "so there's no beer. If that's all you came for, clear out right now. If you want fresh eggs we'll give you a pair any style, but you'll pay for 'em and you'll knock off the rough stuff. That's all we got is eggs and joe, so who's first?"

There was complete silence for a moment. Then someone objected.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Tojo's cousin," Bonelli said. "Now how do you want 'em?"

There was a mutter of discussion, then the kid with the bandaged hand spoke at the end of the hall.

"Make mine sunny side up so I'll know they aren't powdered."

"Give me a pair over easy," someone else hollered.

Then nearly everyone ordered. It was not so much that they wanted eggs as that they wanted something to show for being here, and they accepted Bonelli's supervision as better than nothing. He went back to the kitchen to get things started and put the chickens in the oven first. Then he laid out eggs for the old woman. She looked less suspicious now and listened while he explained with gestures about sunny side up and over easy. She understood English. The old man did not help, but the waitress took down clean plates and set them on the table. Bonelli patted her hip. She giggled. The kitchen began to function, and while Bonelli made coffee Willy and Leeper stood by in the aprons. If you did not think about it too much the intrusion began to seem normal.

When six plates were ready to serve, Bonelli took two and Willy and Leeper each took two, and they went into the hall. A marine whistled.

"Jeez," he said. "Where'd you get such sexy waitresses?"

"Flown in from Hollywood," Bonelli said. "Pay when you're served, men, and let somebody else have your place as soon as you eat."

He hurried to the kid with the bandaged hand, and Willy stopped stock-still as he heard a familiar voice call from one of the dining rooms.

"Godalmighty, it's my old foxhole buddy. Hey, Chick!"

Willy turned with the two plates in his hands. He had almost written off that voice and that beard and those pale blue eyes. You have to carry your own weight in the long run, yet sometimes a little boost helps you over a hump. You feel an affinity for some people that goes beyond a temporary boost too, and Willy was more glad to see Salty Jones alive than he had been to see his own platoon. He did not intend to lean on anyone, but as Salty came around a table toward him he realized how much it had meant to find that lank easy figure at the bottom of a hole on Tarawa saying, *Glad to have you aboard*.

"Well I'll be damned," Willy said.

"Where you been?" Salty asked. "I looked all over for you. Thought you were dead as a mackerel out there on the airport."

"Guess I nearly was," Willy said. Salty reached him and took one of the plates while they shook hands. Both of them grinned as though they did not know what else to do. "Well honest to god," Willy said.

"Yeah, I'd about given up," Salty said.

"Me too. Where's that other guy—George?"

"Got killed by a mortar at the aid station."

"Christ. You'd think it was enough to get hit once."

"Knock it off, knock it off," said a marine at the nearest table. "You'll break my heart, and I ain't got a clean hanky."

"Hey, Willy," Bonelli said. He had come back along the hall and taken the two plates from Leeper, and Leeper had gone for more. "Bring those orders here. I promised these guys first."

"Meet me in the kitchen," Willy told Salty.

"What's the deal?"

"Volunteer mess duty. Maybe we could use a pot walloper."

It went fast then, until they ran out of plates and had to wait for some men to finish eating. Bonelli gave what money he had collected to the old man, and the old man said it was too much. But money meant nothing to men deprived of everything else, so Bonelli told him it would pay for the inconvenience and buy extra supplies for tomorrow's rush. The old man began to help then as best he could, but he got in everyone's way until his wife made him stand at the stove and hand her eggs. She never smiled but worked steadily, basting the chickens in the oven between other chores and keeping up with Bonelli's orders as if he were truly the boss.

"That boy should be a mess sergeant," Salty said. They had given him a dish towel to tie around his waist, and he stood beside the door with a cup of fresh coffee. Willy leaned against the wall next to him while they waited for Bonelli to gather empty plates.

"His main objective's the waitress," Willy said.

"Well that's all right." The waitress was running hot water for dishes, and from behind you were not discouraged by her flat face.

When she shut off the water and looked around you could not tell whether she was basically Polynesian, Oriental, or Negro. Salty winked at her. She giggled and turned away.

"How long you been out of the states?" Willy asked.

"A whole damn lifetime, Chick. Eighteen bleeding months."

"My name's Andy Willy. I knew a Chick Woodruff who got killed."

"Sorry, Andy. Somehow we never get around to introductions."

"God. Eighteen months, Salty. Think you'll get rotated now?"

"In a pig's navel. Maybe after another push."

"How much can a guy take?"

"More than you'd think. How long you been out?"

"Five months."

"It's a start, but don't get the thousand-yard stare yet."

"I shouldn't, but Jesus . . ."

"If your cobber runs this restaurant you'll have it good."

"We don't even have a decent camp."

"No camp's decent. They all make a poor substitute for home."

"I didn't think so a year ago. Where you from, Salty?"

"A little place in Idaho called Coeur d'Alene."

"Coeur d'Alene?" Willy straightened up as though he had been burned. The name made him acutely homesick. He could almost smell pines on the lake shore and see new buildings at an inland naval base called Farragut. It became very real again—evergreen hills, fresh water, and his old life. With Leeper the memory had grown flabby, but Salty Jones revived it with a single name. "I'm from Spokane," Willy said.

"Spokane?" Salty's pale eyes looked suddenly defenseless. "Well I'll be go to hell. My old lady lives there now."

"Your mother?"

"No, my wife."

"Well what do you know." Willy blinked. When you meet a man in a foxhole you do not associate him with women. A man adapted to combat is hard to picture as a lover. Even with a dish towel around his waist Salty did not look domestic, and you could not easily imagine him clean and shaven and presentable enough

to have a wife. You forgot that a man's toughness is not the whole man. You fought down longing and tenderness inside yourself in a belief that true marines felt nothing like it, then all at once the gentle side of human nature leaped out at you again. Behind whores and combat was a truer life, even though you hesitated to accept it as normal any more because it seemed too mild for men who have killed. Yet you could tell that eighteen months had not destroyed Salty's longing for a particular woman in Spokane. You could not see much expression through his beard, but his eyes showed him remembering something very different from Guadalcanal or Tarawa.

"Spokane, Washington," he said softly. "I'll be damned, Andy. It's a real jolt to meet somebody from that part of 'he country."

"I'd trade the whole Pacific for one of those fresh-water lakes—Coeur d'Alene or Pend Oreille."

"Remember snow? I haven't seen snow since I left."

"It snowed the day I started for boot camp."

"Did everyone cry, Andy?"

"My girl did. Nobody else went to the depot."

"Well honest to god." Salty stared at the waitress. She stepped back to let Bonelli put a stack of dirty dishes in the sink. Her hips moved with structural distinctness. "That rear view reminds me a little of Ruby, except Ruby's blond. Big, blond, and a yard wide."

"Does she work in Spokane?"

"Last letter I had she was a cashier in some restaurant. Said it kept her busy, and she's the kind that has to keep busy. Left the kids with her ma in Coeur d'Alene so she could get a job."

"Kids?" Willy said. "You got kids too?"

"Sure thing. Two girls. I never saw the youngest."

"Jesus, Salty."

"What's the matter?"

"Oh nothing. Only I'm not even married."

"Don't let it throw you." Salty sighed. "Neither am I."

His beard got in the way when you wanted to see his face clearly. All you knew was that the pale eyes were serious and disturbed.

"Hey, mate," Bonelli said to him. He had accepted Salty without question, as Willy's friend and as someone who obviously carried the wisdom and experience of one battle more than they did. "How's to dry these dishes for us?"

"Goodo," Salty said. He finished his coffee in one swallow.

"Wait a minute," Willy said. "What do you mean by that?"

"It's strictly between us, Andy." Salty held his empty cup in both hands and tapped it with his fingers, maybe blushing, maybe not. "They call it common-law wife on my papers. She gets her allotment all right, but I wish to hell I didn't have such a mess hanging over my head."

He stepped to the sink and dropped his cup into the dishwater. The waitress washed plates quickly, and as soon as Salty dried them Bonelli handed them to the old woman to be filled. Leeper and Willy took full ones out front. When they ran out of eggs only eight or ten marines had not been served, and they had wandered in after the original bunch began to leave. The old man offered them fish and poi, but the chickens in the oven were done by then and Bonelli told the newcomers to come back tomorrow. He locked the front door after them, and no matter how tired you were it was good to anticipate a home-cooked meal.

They set a table in the biggest dining room and put the old man at the head. He sat down slowly, as if still not quite sure what had happened. Bonelli held a chair for the waitress, and she giggled. He sat between her and Leeper, and Willy and Salty took places opposite them. The old woman had cooked rice to go with the chicken, then she came in with a bottle of wine. She set it in front of Bonelli and smiled.

"For our thanks," she said. "For many thanks, Lieutenant."

"Aw, mom." Bonelli was flushed and grateful. "It's not lieutenant. It's plain Louie. You didn't have to do this."

"So maybe you come back," the old woman said.

"You bet we'll be back. How about this, fellows?"

"Let's drink a toast to the Nakamuras," Leeper said. He stood up to hold a chair for the old woman, pathetically eager to see

everyone happy. "I bet the officers aren't having wine tonight. It's almost like New Zealand."

The wine was sour and the chicken tough, but Bonelli and Leeper kept saying it was the real McCoy. At least you were seated in a civilized manner at a table and could pretend it was fun. The old man and woman grew sleepy, but the waitress began to giggle more. Something Bonelli did under the table made her giggle.

"You take Mary home now," Mrs. Nakamura said to Bonelli when the chicken was gone. She smiled an old woman smile. "Too far alone."

"I hate to eat and run," Bonelli said. His face was flushed from the wine and food and prospects. Mary giggled again as she got up and went toward the kitchen. Bonelli followed her, and Willy remembered a dusky Violet at Pearl Harbor. The shade of their skin did not matter. It was natural to love, and if it was natural it was right—as long as it did not hurt anyone. They heard Bonelli close the rear door as Leeper and the Nakamuras started clearing the table.

"Sit still," Leeper told Willy and Salty. He seemed to like being occupied and helpful. "You guys shoot the breeze till we get through."

Willy was glad he did not have to do anything. After that little wine he felt beyond moving, like the kid who had wished the MPs would come along with a ride. It was very late.

"Did I shock you about my family?" Salty asked when they were alone.

"No," Willy said. "I'm not very Christian any more."

Salty frowned and put his elbows on the table.

"There aren't supposed to be atheists in foxholes," he said.

"Oh hell. That's where I learned to be one."

"You must have learned fast."

"Well God doesn't sit up there passing out merit badges."

"Didn't you feel like praying once in a while?"

"Never. Why should God listen to people whine for help?"

"There must be a right and wrong though, Andy. You don't

need a merit badge to see the difference. Would you knock up your girl and let them call her common-law?"

Willy looked toward the door. He heard Leeper talking in the kitchen as if the Nakamuras were neighbors he had known for years. He heard water running and dishes rattling.

"No," he said. "But not because God might get mad."

"But you know there's a scheme to things," Salty said. "Law and order. Good and bad. Even if you don't blame it on God."

"You mean a bigger sort of Marine Corps?"

"Oh listen, Andy." Salty straightened up and rubbed his beard. He spoke quietly, although he appeared disturbed. "Take me for instance. It's right to have a wife and kids, but it's wrong to act like you don't. That's what I tried to do, only now I'm ashamed of it. Ruby would've married me if I'd insisted, but she said she didn't give a damn what people thought. I let it go at that because I didn't know any better, but then she began to get tough somehow. She bleached her hair and left the baby with her ma, and when she got knocked up the second time I tried to desert her. I joined the Marine Corps."

Salty shook his head and Willy did not know what to say. He seemed to remember this Ruby yet did not understand how that could be. And he did not understand why anyone should have to answer to an outraged deity in such a case. The responsibility was within yourself.

"Did you love her?" he said at last.

"Very much." Salty's pale eyes were the most vulnerable thing about him. It was odd to see them looking at you from that unkempt face. "I loved her in a wild sort of way like a guy does when he first gets the knack of women. Then I hit the 'Canal and stopped to think about it. You can't live on that wild stuff. You can't make kids and run. God or no God, Andy, you've got to face it. We were wrong to let our kids be born as though we didn't care a hoot. Ruby'd make a darn good mother for them, if they had a decent father. I'm sure of it, so I've got to get back and make an honest woman out of her—before the kids have to live down our faults. All I ask is to go home and do right by my own family.

I've done my best for what they call society. Now I want to go stateside and apologize to Ruby and start over. Sometimes I think I'll go psycho if they don't let me clean up my own life before I have to wade ashore somewhere and meet a Jap bullet with my number on it."

For a moment they both sat still, and Willy thought if there was a God the power of human longing would have long since unbalanced Him. No one concerned with the human condition could withstand century after century of these urgent wants and needs and efforts.

Then Salty stood up and put his hand on Willy's shoulder.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to beat my gums so much."

"If it's any help," Willy said, "my gal wouldn't marry me either."

"Twist her arm as soon as you get back, Andy."

"We were pretty young though."

"Hell. I won't be twenty-three till June."

"That's five years older than me."

"At the rate the war's goin' we'll both be gray-headed before Tokyo falls." Salty turned away. "But maybe if we stick together now it won't be quite so lonesome quite so often. Come on, Andy. Let's help what's-his-name with the dishes and go hit the sack."

2

They put up tents all the next day but could not put up enough for everyone. The company clerk held a mail call when they returned to the bivouac area, and Private Willy got three letters.

"I'll be along after a while," he told Bonelli and Leeper. They wanted to go to the Kamuela Kafe before it got disorganized again, but he wanted to read his mail and try to find a toothbrush at the Red Cross tent. "I'll wait for Salty and bring him over."

He sat cross-legged on his poncho and looked at the letters. Mail was supposed to be important, yet he did not feel excited about it. Tarawa had done something to his capacity for excitement; if a thing were not vivid or violent now it did not move him. The two V-mail letters seemed trivial in his hands—slick little photographic

imitations of real letters. If they could be reduced in size, they should not have been written large in the first place.

One of them was from his brother Ralph. He had heard nothing from Ralph since he had run away from his farm, and the time for brotherly affection had passed. It should not require a war to make someone realize who you were. Ralph had had his chance when he married and moved to the farm in Hanford and took Andy to live with him, but there had been no sign of affection from Ralph and his wife in those days. Gratuitous cruelty and punishment had bred further disobedience in Andy until Ralph finally threatened him with reform school, then Andy hitchhiked to Spokane where Lloyd and Frances took him in as they might take in a stray dog.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard you was in the Marine Corps," Ralph wrote. "How about that? I bet they beat some stubbornness out of your tow-head. But me, I've got it made, Andy. I sold out the farm and went to work on a government defense plant here at Hanford, if you can believe it. Good pay and——"

Willy tore the letter into small pieces. He had seen a naval base develop on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille, so it did not surprise him that Hanford should sprout a defense project where asparagus and peppermint and cherries used to grow. He did not care how well Ralph was doing either. It was too late to mend those family ties.

The letter from Frances was hardly better. She complained about Spokane's weather and hoped Lloyd would be able to move to the coast soon. She had it so good that she could not bother to imagine her letter reaching someone with legitimate gripes. What did she think troops overseas were doing, and why should he be interested in the hardships of her city winter? He also tore the second V-mail to pieces.

Then he hesitated to open Judy's letter, even though it was an unreduced original sent by airmail. Somehow she would probably fail him too. Tarawa had created a gap that possibly no civilian could bridge, yet Judy's love ought to come closer than those makeshift homes.

He tore open the envelope and read two pages of clean clear handwriting. Nothing happened. There was this ink on paper referring to USO dances and snow and the approach of Christmas, but it did not become Judy. Of course she had written her letter before Tarawa, but shouldn't there have been a premonition? Shouldn't she have sensed disorder? She closed with love, but what was love if it did not stir you?

He sat staring down the long slope to the sea. The sun was low, and the water glittered. A cool breeze was getting cooler. There was not a trace of tropical hula Hawaii, and he felt wasted.

"Was it a Dear John?" someone asked behind him.

Willy turned and saw a tall clean-shaven marine with bleached blue eyes. His cheeks and chin were almost white where his beard had been.

"Godalmighty," Willy said. "You look peeled, Salty."

"Them bastards made me shave. What's the news from home?"

Willy suddenly ripped Judy's letter in half, then in quarters.

"No Dear John," he said. "But it was sure as hell a waste of paper." He stood up tiredly. "What did you hear from Ruby?"

"Not a thing." Salty stood with his hands in his hip pockets, his lean face painfully bald. "She don't write often, and neither do I. Reckon the Nakamuras will have steak for us tonight?"

"They promised. But I'd rather have wine. I'd like to get falling-down drunk and pass out cold. You know, Salty, I've never in my whole life had anything I really wanted. I never wanted a lot, and was willing to work for that, but all I ever got was the purple shaft." He threw his torn letters to the wind and did not watch the pieces fall. "Come on. I should brush my teeth, but who needs teeth when you suck the hind tit?"

3

By Christmas Eve they had moved into new tents, and there were cold showers occasionally in open-air buildings among prefabricated offices and galleys. Wind blew constantly. It whipped the canvas quarters until your nerves grew raw from it, but you could

not get away for liberty. On Christmas Eve Lt. McGhee was Officer of the Day again.

"Listen, Lieutenant," he told the adjutant. "I had the Thanksgiving duty, and those forlorn bastards on holiday posts kill me."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," the adjutant said. He was a new one. The other one had been given temporary command of a company, and this one had been shifted from the mortar platoon. He was flabby-faced and conscientious and out of his element, as though he had come along to observe but had had to pitch in and help. "I didn't use your boys anyway."

"But how can I go to midnight Mass?"

"Inspect your posts afterward."

"Why doesn't Kocopy stand a turn on duty?"

"The colonel's sending him to Hilo for recreation gear."

"What colonel?"

"Our major. He got promoted to lieutenant colonel this morning."

"Oh fine. When do the boys get promoted?"

"Quit snapping at me, Lieutenant. I'm not the commandant."

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant. I didn't realize."

"And knock off the sarcasm, Mac. I've cooperated the best I could. You got Salty Jones to act as corporal till we get some rates."

"Oh that was big cooperation. I'm twelve men short including a platoon sergeant, and I get one pfc as acting corporal."

"You wouldn't be so short if you kept Bonelli and Leeper away from that Jap restaurant. The colonel's going to get wind of it some day."

"They're not hurting anything. They've come closer to solving the recreation problem than anyone else in this effing division."

"Maybe, Lieutenant. But just the same you're always missing two men on working parties, and I'm warning you——"

"Don't you dare, Lieutenant. Don't tell me how to run my platoon." McGhee looked down furiously at the adjutant in the canvas chair beside a field desk. He did not like anyone in a staff position, yet he knew his attitude was irrational. He understood the system.

None of it was desirable; all of it was enforced pressure from top to bottom. If the adjutant really wanted to get nasty he could pull his rank. He was a very senior second lieutenant. You sneered at rank a great deal, but it had to be acknowledged when the cheese got binding.

"All right," the adjutant said. He was angry too, and it gave his flabby face more character. "But don't try to tell me how to run Bn-1 either. The duty roster is my business, and the colonel signed it, and the Prince of Peace will forgive you for wearing a duty belt to midnight Mass." Then he snorted. "Prince of Peace yet. Good will among men." He put his hands on his cheeks and pushed the skin of his face into folds beneath his eyes. "God. The human race is incorrigible."

Lt. McGhee went out of the office and slammed the screen door. He was late for changing the guard and hated to keep the men waiting, but since Tarawa this whole military rigmarole seemed profoundly implausible anyway. The sun was shining. It was cool but not cold, which made him resent the Hawaiian climate too. All his life there had been snow for Christmas, and its absence today was a steady reminder of many other absences—coziness, gifts, tinsel, choirs, friends, his wife.

Near Bn-4 a jeep had stopped and a navy lieutenant jg in starched khaki was getting out. Lt. McGhee glared at him. The jg smiled. He had a boyish face with bright watchful eyes, and he was a doctor.

"Officer of the Day?" he asked.

"Only on holidays," Lt. McGhee said.

"Rough." The jg saluted sloppily. "Doc Frechette reporting aboard, sir." The jeep driver looked pained. Lt. McGhee returned the salute with cold hostility. Frechette was not suffering. He had no combat memories or chronic fatigue and resentment. The least he could have done was hide his civilian robustness.

"We have two doctors already," McGhee said.

"Your senior man got promoted and transferred," Frechette said.

"They seem pretty free with promotions at higher levels."

"Rank has its privileges, Lieutenant. Where shall I billet?"

McGhee pointed to the adjutant's office.

"See him. Nice of you to call our tents billets."

"It sounds military. Do I visit the commanding officer first?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm not up on post-battle etiquette."

"I suppose not. I suppose everything seems rather foolish now."

"You won't find the battalion an exactly Happy Ship."

The doctor shrugged. He appeared clinically sympathetic.

"At least you won't leave for another one right away," he said.

"Isn't that grand," McGhee said. "Maybe you'll get reassigned to the Navy before the next one. Merry Christmas, Doctor."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Likewise."

McGhee walked quickly past the Bn-4 building and saw a six-by-six truck parked behind it. A regimental officer swung down from the cab.

"Hey, Lieutenant," he said. "Are you the OD?"

"Only for Lent and holy days," McGhee told him.

"Then come and sign for this beer."

"What beer?"

"Your Christmas ration, chum. Two cans per man."

"Let the recreation officer sign for it."

"He's going ashore. They want the ODs to guard it anyway."

"Why not the Bn-4?"

"He's in Hilo picking up sea bags and clothes." The regimental officer grew impatient. "Come on, mate. So I can go drink my share."

"Two cans for everybody?"

"Men and officers alike. By the numbers. You'll have to count the stuff because it's issued on battalion morning reports, and there's no more till the PX opens. Where's your guard detail, Lieutenant?"

"Don't get your water hot, Santa Claus." Every normal situation irritated him. The very necessity for meeting it was a strain. "They didn't tell me I had to fill Christmas stockings. I'll get my elves."

He went to the guard tent and relieved the old Officer of the Day. Then he inspected the guard and took the starboard watch to

unload beer. They were unimpressed by the quantity and sullen about handling it without drinking any. When Lt. McGhee had counted it and broken it down for distribution to company commanders he wound up with six extra cans. He thought he had made a mistake in checking rosters, so he took the extra beer to his own tent until somebody should squawk. Lt. Kocopy had been his only tentmate, but now Doc Frechette had moved another cot into the bare quarters and was spreading brand new white navy blankets on it. Lt. Kocopy had dressed in fresh khaki borrowed from the doctor. It fit very tightly but looked wonderfully clean. He was trying to button the shirt collar but stopped wide-eyed when he saw McGhee's armload of beer.

"*Mañana*," he said. He meant manna, like manna from heaven, and reached for the cans. McGhee hit Kocopy's arm with his shoulder

"Keep your effing hands off it," he said. He went to his cot and dropped the cans onto it. "You can get polluted in Hilo."

"Aw Jeez, Mac," Kocopy said. He tried to button the collar of his borrowed shirt again. "I might not get a chance." He snorted through his damaged nose. "Recreation, for chrissake. They want me to buy baseball bats and parcheesi boards. It'd do more good to lease a whorehouse. Say, fellows, did you ever try one of them fancy jobs in a whorehouse?"

He got the collar buttoned and looked as red in the face as a lobster. He reached for his field scarf, and you wondered if Tarawa meant anything to him besides a blank in his sex life. Doc Frechette laughed.

"I thought Rocks and Shoals discouraged all that," he said.

"Nothing discourages Ted," McGhee said. "Ask him about sleeping with two dames at once. Or how many times a night he——"

"Don't be so goddamn puritan." Kocopy was suddenly angry too, and you knew the battle had left him as short-tempered as anyone. He was as ready to hit McGhee as McGhee was to hit back, out of the same senseless irritation. Frechette stepped casually between them.

"How about a snort of stateside bourbon?" he asked.

"They don't make it any more," McGhee said.

"I have some of the last batch in my foot locker."

"No kiddin'?" Kocopy said. He began to finish tying his field scarf. "We'd be glad to welcome you aboard with it. By the way, Mac. Doc Frechette got billeted with us. This's Mac McGhee, Doc."

They shook hands briefly, not quite committing themselves. Then the doctor opened his foot locker and took a roll of towels from around a full fifth of bonded bourbon. McGhee sat down on his cot and rubbed his face while the doctor opened the bottle and handed it to Kocopy.

"*Mañana*," Kocopy said softly. He held the bottle in both hands as if holding an hour-old infant. Then he drank a short swallow, then a longer one, then several more. He lowered the bottle and waited blissfully for the throat burn to subside. Then he said, "Real *mañana*."

"Peace on earth," the doctor said.

"Amen." Kocopy turned and offered the bottle to McGhee.

"I'm on duty," McGhee told him. "Your duty."

"Loosen up, Mac. The Corps won't fly apart if you take a drink."

"I'll have my two cans of beer later, like the men."

"Why be a martyr if your cobber has whisky?"

"I don't go for special privileges among officers."

"Oh Christ, McGhee. Somebody has to have privileges."

"Let the generals have it," McGhee said. "They get all the credit anyway, but I don't want to be Grant or Pershing or Dugout Doug."

"You're hardly enlisted material either," the doctor said.

"Well at least I've been in the fight, Doc. And generals don't fight wars. They may win or lose them, but they don't fight them. They move men around on neat little chessboards, but unfortunately war isn't a chess game. It's real live men—real flesh and blood and scared guts facing other flesh and blood in nasty holes. Identify yourself with them once. They fight wars, not the goddamn generals with the glory and privileges. So who gets two lousy cans of beer and a few baseball bats for Christmas? Who stands guard duty Thanksgiving night after crawling out of the stink on Tarawa?

Did you ever wake up one of those poor bastards and hear him ask if you still believe in God?"

Kocopy stared at McGhee as if he did not know him. Doc Frechette frowned his clinically sympathetic frown, then stepped over and took the bottle of whisky from Kocopy. He held it toward McGhee.

"Take it," he said. "I've got another bottle too, Mac, and you can dole it all out to the men in your platoon. They'll get a smell apiece and be privileged above other platoons. Then where are we?"

"Yeah," Kocopy said. "My platoon won't get none."

"All right," McGhee said. He took off his cap and duty belt and wished he could skip the next twenty-four hours, or maybe the next twenty-four months. "So it isn't the best of all possible worlds, but nobody busts a gut to improve it. See if you can't arrange something to shake the monotony, Ted. Everyone's going psycho."

"Sure, Mac." Kocopy put on an overseas cap and looked at his watch. "The colonel's jeep driver has a couple of leads." He winked at Frechette. "Thanks for the khaki, Doc. And that shot of privilege."

He left the tent, and the doctor stood holding the bottle at his side. He swung it back and forth idly past his knee. He was a nice guy actually; displaced and green, but friendly and shrewd.

"Sorry for the sour reception I've given you, Doc," McGhee said.

"I didn't expect red carpet, Mac."

"It isn't personal. I snarl at everyone these days. Christmas should never happen overseas. I'm homesick, heartsick, warsick, and my wife's pregnant. Do they make medicine for Christmasitis?"

"Temporary relief," Frechette said. He held out the bottle again. McGhee had not tasted bourbon since leaving New Zealand. He disliked its sickening-sweet flavor with nasty undertones, but he liked its effects. Eventually your mind rose up to tug at its moorings, and it was this lift that counted.

"I have no right to drink on duty," he said.

"In moderation it eases strain."

"But it still takes advantage of rank."

The doctor shrugged slightly.

"Wherever you have authority, you have some abuse of authority."

McGhee looked at him more closely. His boyishness seemed a clever camouflage for a great deal of competence. Both of them smiled.

"Okay, Doc." McGhee accepted the bottle. "I'm no paragon."

"Just one for the Christmas syndrome."

"And prayers for a happier New Year."

McGhee drank quickly. He expected it to burn badly because he was out of practice, but he took several swallows before he felt the roughness. Then he lowered the bottle and closed his eyes until the taste receded. In a moment he pinched his nose shut to sound like Kocopy.

"In a word," he said, "*mañana*."

Frechette grinned and took his bottle again. He started to raise it to his own lips but stopped and frowned a bit.

"By the way," he said. "What did you tell that guard after Tarawa when he asked if you believe in God?"

McGhee picked up his duty belt and snapped it on.

"I don't remember. I was half asleep. But I'm Catholic, Doc. I do believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

"Had the kid run out of faith?"

"I think so. He scared me."

"Don't we all scare you—all Protestants and non-believers?"

McGhee stood up. Even standing seemed easier, as if ballast lines had already been cut. His smile even felt easier.

"God's mercy is infinite," he said.

"Well, cheers." The doctor drank a little, then capped the bottle and slipped it under McGhee's blankets. "It's there to be used in case you have a relapse before the day's over."

The relapse came shortly after dark. There were no lights in any of the tents except candles, and the loneliness of canvas shelters in silence and trampled dry grass unnerved McGhee. In the guard tent men from other outfits merely acknowledged his attempts at

conversation with yessir and nosir, as though he were less than present—a sort of totem spirit to be pacified and ignored since he was powerful but not very. From time to time he walked back to his own tent to see if Doc Frechette had finished checking sick bay supplies and procedures, but the tent remained empty. In the dark alone he took a second and third and fourth drink, because he had already sacrificed his principles.

When taps went he could not stand the thought of acres of men going to bed on Christmas Eve with no more comfort than two cans of beer and a sad bugle. He hurried to his cot for a fifth drink. It was a recklessly long one, and afterward he knew he had gone beyond moderation.

Well, well, well, he thought. General McGhee seems drunk.

He clicked his heels together, raised the bottle as if it were a rifle at present arms, and for a moment stood at rigid attention.

“Yessir,” he said out loud. “Nosir. Yessir. Nosir. Take your effing holiday guard and shove it, sir.”

His tongue was not thick on the esses, so he relaxed and returned the bottle to his sack, tucking the blankets up around its neck.

In case we have bed check, he thought with ballooning hilarity.

And the hilarity amazed him. His Christmas syndrome had been anesthetized, and suddenly he felt an urge to shout glad tidings! But as Officer of the Day he could not shout. Discretion is also the better part of intoxication, he decided, and irregardless of my condition I'll inspect posts before Mass as well as after.

Watching shepherds first, he told himself sternly.

He turned about face and walked into the side of the tent. He did not dare laugh in case he could not stop, yet the entry flaps were ridiculously elusive all at once. When he finally got out he took a deep breath and looked for the Star of Bethlehem. There were scattered clouds and only faint stars, but then this was A.D. 1943. *Mañana*, he thought, and quickly unthought it before the reminder of Kocopy made him laugh.

He walked to post number one with his head up, his feet taking care of themselves. Even candles in the tents had been put out, and it was very dark. At post number one he could find no sentry. He

was not sure it was post number one though. Camp looked different at night, but he knew exactly where post number two was.

He went there, and that sentry was a good shepherd, leaning on his rifle, watching. Lt. McGhee stopped and smiled warmly.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Merry Christmas yourself, you silly son of a bitch."

Lt. McGhee blinked. He had not been called that since Quantico.

"Hey, there," he said.

"Hey there yourself. How come Santy Claus left you so much beer?"

"Now hold on, lad."

"Aw go hit the sack before the OD catches you."

"I am the OD, goddammit."

The sentry stiffened.

"Well Jesus Christ," he said. Then he probably saw the duty belt, because at last he saluted smartly. "Post two all secure, sir."

Lt. McGhee returned the salute, disappointed by the sentry's attitude.

"It should be a Merry Christmas," he said.

"Yessir. It should be, sir."

"We don't have to snarl at each other."

"Nosir. I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I didn't recognize you."

"Couldn't you say Merry Christmas to a plain buddy?"

"Yessir. Except it isn't very."

"Don't you believe in it?"

"Yessir. Only it's pretty crappy this year."

"The crap won't last forever."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"You're not alone."

"Nosir. I s'pose not."

The sentry had grown uneasy about a tent in the next row. Then Lt. McGhee heard the voices and saw a dim flicker of candlelight.

"Keep your filthy Jap meat away from me," the loudest voice said.

"What are you pissed off about?" another voice said.

"Them Japs killed our buddies."

"These Japs are American."

"They all work for Tojo."

"You're a cotton-pickin' liar."

A shadow inside the tent blotted out the candlelight. Someone hit someone, and Lt. McGhee began running between the tents.

"Stay there," he told the sentry.

It was his own platoon area, and he felt betrayed by un-Christian dissension on home ground. When he got through the tent flap he saw Salty Jones holding Clay Gosse prostrate on a cot by a wad of skivvy shirt. The candle sat on the deck beside the centerpole, and Willy and Leeper and Bonelli stood with steak sandwiches and cartons of ice cream in their hands.

"What's going on here?" Lt. McGhee said.

The men straightened to attention, except Jones who was slapping Gosse's face with the flat of his hand.

"Knock it off," Lt. McGhee said. "Right now."

Jones realized who it was and let go of Gosse. Then Gosse recognized the lieutenant and got to his feet. He was wearing only skivvies, but the others were fully dressed in dungarees.

"Just a little Christmas party," Bonelli said bluffly.

"Some party," the lieutenant said. "Tell me more."

"We brought stuff from the café," Leeper told him. He was pale and held up his sandwich and ice cream. "But Gosse wouldn't take any."

"Were you going to force-feed him?" They all stood at awkward attention with the candle lighting their faces from below and making them look weirdly masked. Lt. McGhee felt dizzy, as if the tent were shifting rather than the candle flame. He turned to Gosse, recognizing him mostly by shape. "Why did you start it?"

"I didn't start nothin'," Gosse said. You always recognized his crippled speech. "I was sound asleep when they brought that Jap food."

"He didn't have to throw his sandwich at us," Willy said.

"No," the lieutenant said. "But couldn't you turn the other cheek?"

The men stared at him as if they were hollow-eyed masks in a pagan cave. *'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house . . .*

"Oh shit." Mr. McGhee felt a nausea of pity for everyone. "We'll all be rock-happy if we don't get away from ourselves pretty soon. But it's after taps, and they don't allow candles, and I'm OD, and you can't have a party next to a sentry on post. Come with me, men."

"Aw, Lieutenant," Bonelli said.

"All of you except Gosse." Lt. McGhee stepped over and smoothed the blankets on Gosse's cot. "You put out the candle and go back to sleep. Perchance to dream. The rest of you bring that chow and follow me."

He went out, and the men followed after him to the sentry.

"Carry on," he told the guard. "I'll take care of these guys."

He intended to take them to the guard tent and bawl them out while they ate their sandwiches and ice cream. At least he could say Merry Christmas when they left. But as they passed sick bay the door opened and spilled light out, and he had a brilliant idea.

"Wait here," he told the four men.

"Is that you, Mac?" Doc Frechette asked from the sick bay steps.

"Yeah, Doc. Come here a sec." He believed Frechette would understand glad tidings. He took the doctor's arm and walked him to the other end of the building. "Anybody in sick bay?" he said.

"The duty corpsman."

"Do me a favor?"

"If I can."

"Loan me your whisky till I get my next ration."

Doc Frechette leaned closer in the darkness and sniffed.

"Is there any left?"

"That other fifth. And let's use sick bay. It's got blackout screens and a lantern. If anybody gets rowdy you can say it's combat fatigue."

Frechette laughed, and McGhee almost felt collegiate again.

"Is this cricket?" the doctor said.

"Hell no. But I think it's Christian."

"Roger. Go on in and I'll fetch the hooch."

"Thanks, Doc. And bring those six cans of beer for wash."

The duty corpsman was mixing himself a cocktail of sick-bay alcohol and stolen grapefruit juice. He froze as McGhee's men filed in with sandwiches and ice cream in their hands. Then he stepped in front of his canteen cup on the supply chest and held the bottle of alcohol behind his back as the lieutenant came in and closed the door.

"Merry Christmas," Lt. McGhee said to him.

"Yessir. What can I do for you?"

"Stand easy, lad. Sit down, men. The doctor went to get his scalpel and sutures, and we may have a successful operation yet."

But it was too forced somehow. It was not a satisfactory party. They divided the steak sandwiches and let the ice cream melt and passed Frechette's whisky around, but none of the enlisted men forgot to say yessir and nosir to the doctor and lieutenant. They were polite but suspicious, and Willy and Leeper looked almost young enough to prefer sugarplums to adult wassail. Only the corpsman loosened up with liquor, and he cornered the doctor with a long bleary discourse on how nobly the marines had died at Tarawa. Then Lt. McGhee realized that whisky no longer did him the least good, and besides feeling homesick and heartsick he had developed an acute headache.

"Can you get the men to their sacks without any more fights?" he asked Bonelli. It was nearly midnight, and Mass was held at regiment.

"Salty will," Bonelli said. He swayed a bit from the drinking and looked ingratiatingly sinful, as though the party would be fine if it moved on now to greener fields. "I've got a date, Lieutenant."

"Even tonight?" McGhee said. "Are you trying to outdo Lt. Kocopy?"

"Could be, but tonight I've got a date at regiment."

"Mass?"

"Sure. I never get so drunk I miss it."

Lt. McGhee smiled. He no longer felt like smiling yet hoped

there was something essentially right in Bonelli's attitude. At any rate it did not reject real Glad Tidings for artificial lifts by alcohol.

"Okay," McGhee said. "Let's go together, Louie. There's beer left, but let's try holy water for a change."

4

The first liberty party left camp in January, chosen by lots. They rode in an old bus that Lt. Kocopy had chartered to make a three-day tour of the island. Private Willy sat on a stool squeezed into the aisle between Lt. Kocopy and a beefy platoon sergeant who kept the air thick with cigar smoke. The bus was driven by a Kanaka named Vince, and Vince thought the men were as serious about seeing Hawaii as his peacetime passengers had been. He paid less attention to driving than to pointing out the extent of the Parker ranch, mango and banana trees, and the home of what he called his cousin the postmistress. But the men were hardly interested in mangoes, bananas, and respectable cousins.

At sea level it was much too hot for January, and the liberty party wanted beer first of all after the morning ride. There was bright blue water in the harbor at Kailua, but no beer. A fat waitress at the local restaurant told them it was Sunday and the sale of beer was prohibited on Sunday. This fat waitress had a cold eye for servicemen on the make, and Lt. Kocopy was as stunned as his men about the day and the blue law. He had counted on beer to take the curse off sightseeing.

But Vince was happy. After lunch in Kailua he drove them on past a poi factory and hillsides of coffee shrubs and told them how lucky they were to be spending the night in Kealakekua. They remembered the song about a little grass shack in Kealakekua, Hawaii, and thought there would be dark girls in leis and grass skirts among the banana trees. When they got there in mid-afternoon they did not even see grass huts. They saw a village of plain wooden houses with tin roofs, and the hotel where Lt. Kocopy had made reservations was an imitation of cheap two-story stateside buildings with flat false fronts. The girls who worked in the hotel were

the only girls in sight. They were strictly formal with the guests, as though they had been warned about marines.

"Let's go on to Hilo," the beefy platoon sergeant said to Lt. Kocopy when rooms had been assigned and everyone had come down to the dingy hotel lobby again to find something to do.

Lt. Kocopy glanced at Vince without much hope.

"Oh no," Vince said brightly. "Too far. Not tonight."

"What the hell is there for liberty in this dump?" the platoon sergeant asked. Vince looked hurt, then shrugged.

"Swim?" he said. "At the City of Refuge?"

"Women?"

"Oh yes. But I don't think so."

As a last resort they rode with him down to Napoopoo and the beach. There was a grove of tall graceful palms at the edge of a small blue bay between two rocky points. It was calm and lovely and deserted. It was tropically beautiful, yet there was nothing to be done with it. Its peace was too great, too static. You needed violent pleasures to counteract violent memories of Tarawa. If you had to go sightseeing on Hawaii the island should at least oblige you with a volcanic eruption, a display of spectacular nature. There was no excitement in quiet surf on fine sand beneath a clear sky, without beer, without women.

Some of the men stripped to their skivvies and swam for a while, some stretched out in the shade and slept, but no one except Vince really enjoyed the afternoon. Private Willy walked alone onto rocks beyond the palms and sat down beside a pool of water left by the receded tide, smelling the stale seaside smell of salt and iodine and dried slime in hot sun. He would have liked to know more about the chemistry and biology of this ocean which had become so large a factor in his life, yet there was no incentive to learn. You did not know whether you would live long enough for knowledge to do you any good. It was more vital to confirm what life you had—in some frenzy of activity, emotion, intoxication, sex.

After dinner Private Willy sat alone on a bench in front of the hotel in Kealakekua, like a country boy adrift in a country town.

Most of the men had gone with Vince to a Western movie at the town theater, but Willy believed that a place with a song written about it would produce an appropriate adventure if you waited hard enough—a dusky dark-eyed beauty like Violet at Pearl Harbor, available only at a given moment. He played with a couple of mangy dogs and ate bananas, but he did not see a single soul outside in the darkness until a native man crossed quietly at the corner to pass by on the other side of the street.

At the same time he heard voices coming from the opposite direction. They sounded like marine voices, then he saw two men in khaki approaching the native. One of them swung out and deliberately bumped against him. God we're a sad bunch of sacks, Willy thought. Then that marine grabbed the native by one arm and pushed him roughly against a building.

"Why don'tcha watch where you're goin'?" the marine said.

It was Clay Gosse's cripple-mouthed voice, but the other marine blocked Willy's view of him and the man against the building.

"You're a Jap, ain'tcha?" this other marine said.

Willy stood up and stepped out of the light from the hotel window in order to see better. For a moment his eyes did not adjust, yet he could tell that both marines were holding the Jap to the wall. Each of them was bigger than the Jap, and Willy waited for the sound of a blow as though he had been waiting for such a sound all day. Only violence could snap the tedium.

"We're Jap killers," he heard Gosse saying. "We'd as soon kill you as look at you, you sneaky yellow-bellied bastard."

Then all at once that was too much. Willy began running across the street. The dogs he had befriended joined him with happy yaps. Gosse and the other marine turned. Between them Willy saw the face of a middle-aged Jap in glasses, like a younger Mr. Nakamura, his suit coat pulled back where they held him, his hat fallen at his feet.

"Let him alone," Willy said. He stopped at the curb and thought, Oh shit, I coulda fought with Gosse in our own tent.

"Who do you think you are?" Gosse's friend turned loose of the

Jap and stepped toward Willy with his fists clenched and raised to the level of his belt. He was six inches taller than Willy.

"I said let him alone," Willy repeated evenly.

"Another Jap lover, Tommy," Gosse said. "Like that wop and all of 'em in my tent." He gave the Jap a shove along the building, caught Tommy by the arm, and stepped toward Willy with a tight smile. "He wouldn't fight 'em at all, except he got drafted."

The Jap picked up his hat and started quickly for the hotel.

"I'll fight the right ones as much as you," Willy said. He felt a sort of ecstatic fury of frustration. "And I'll fight you sonsabitches now, if you're not too chickenshit to do it one at a time."

"Let me have him," Gosse said as the bigger one started to swing. Then Gosse lunged forward, and Willy felt a fist graze his right cheek as he ducked to the left. At least tension was being converted into action. He hit Gosse on the mouth, and the dogs bore in to augment the confusion with shrill yapping. Gosse swung again and missed, then Willy knocked him against the building. He gasped and got ready for Tommy, who kicked the dogs aside and moved in to take over. There was a kind of satisfaction in it, even if now he took a beating.

"Hold it!" Gosse said furiously. He got his balance and rushed Willy before the big guy could. He was wildly mad and did not know how to fight well anyway. They went into a clinch and began wrestling. Gosse was much heavier and would have forced Willy down, but all at once Tommy had both his arms between their heads to pry them apart.

"Quick," he said. "Break it up. Here comes the lieutenant."

Gosse abruptly let go, and Willy stumbled backward swinging blindly. He had not gotten everything out of his system and figured Tommy's interference was some kind of trick, yet suddenly he was grabbed from behind. He struggled to turn and hit his new opponent, but Lt. Kocopy held him with one arm around his chest as if he were weightless and inert.

"For chrissake," the lieutenant said. He kicked at the two dogs snarling at his feet and spun Willy around to face him. "Ain't it

bad enough without goin' to the brig over nothin'?" He shook Willy as though he were a naughty child. The fight went out of Willy completely. There was no use in hitting a lieutenant. "You gonna knock it off?"

"Yessir," Willy said. He began to pant.

"Just a friendly quarrel among tentmates," Tommy said.

"Well Jesus Christ." Lt. Kocopy put a heavy arm across Willy's shoulders and breathed as if he had been fighting too. "You'll never get your rocks off this way. What's the matter with you?"

"Why'd we hafta come here?" Gosse said, his voice tight and angry.

"How else could I get you out of camp?"

"Aren't there any white folks on this island?"

"What difference does it make? A woman's a woman."

"We ain't seen a woman," Tommy said. "Where are they?"

Lt. Kocopy sighed nasally and patted Willy's shoulder.

"Jeez, fellows. A recreation officer can't lay 'em on the line for you. They were here when I scouted this route in the colonel's jeep. Now go on up to your rooms while I pacify the natives. I don't want to put you on report, and maybe in Hilo tomorrow you'll find *mañana*."

5

Next morning they rode around the foot of Mauna Loa through miles of dry green sugar cane fields and old lava flows. Vince gave the exact date of each flow and explained that there were two kinds of lava, *aa* and *pahoehoe*. No one took notes. And when they reached the fern jungles of Hawaii National Park, Vince seemed to forget all about driving in his excitement over greater wonders ahead. He turned from the wheel to talk across his shoulder as if the blunt silence of his passengers meant they hung on every word, steering only when Lt. Kocopy reminded him of a certain necessity for it. And then the men became excited. They stopped for lunch at Volcano House.

As though they could smell their way or had been issued a spe-

cial communiqué by mental telepathy, twenty-four enlisted men got off the bus and marched in single file directly to the bar. In half an hour they were all drunk. They did not drink beer as they might have done yesterday. They drank mixed drinks of imitation bourbon with real ice, and Private Willy finished two whisky sours before he remembered that the stuff contained alcohol. He did not care what it contained as long as it was cool and he felt alive again. He asked the bartender for a third one, and nobody would have gone to lunch if Lt. Kocopy had not ordered them to the dining room. Twenty minutes later everyone was back in the bar, including the lieutenant.

"Man," said the corpsman who had been in sick bay for the Christmas party. "I thought that crazy gook would find some way to keep on sightseeing till our time ran out."

"Drink hearty," the big platoon sergeant said. He was already glassy-eyed from imitation bourbon. "The way he drives we may never get to Hilo. And after looking at the rest of the island I wouldn't count on finding a woman there either." He swore softly, then tossed off the rest of his fifth drink. "But if you can't get laid, the next best thing's to get so stiff you couldn't manage anyway."

"Jesus," the corpsman said. "What a liberty. Hey, bartender!"

Some of the men got very drunk and began to sing dirty songs, then the lieutenant paid more attention to Vince who had not been drinking but urging the party to leave so that they would be in Hilo before dark. Lt. Kocopy was happy with developments at Volcano House but did not want trouble with the management, so he started coaxing the men out to the bus. He told them they could ride to Hilo now in a blaze of whisky and finish the binge there. When the bus was loaded Vince climbed behind the wheel with a broad grin, and they drove off in high spirits.

But even then Vince did not go straight to Hilo. He had not finished his tour yet, and apparently nothing would stop him from finishing it. The next thing Private Willy knew they had parked at Thurston Lava Tube and Vince was leading the whole reeling group through a black tunnel, explaining happily in the darkness above gung-ho shouts the reasons for its existence and size, as if

everyone were sober and on a Sunday School picnic. And then still not convinced that things were the way they were, he drove his busload of drunken marines to the edge of Halemaumau Pit and urged everyone out to see it. The men staggered to the guard rail, hollered down the 700-foot crater as if it were an old well, and tried to push one another in.

"Oh no," Lt. Kocopy said. He had been feeling fine and thought this was an alternate highway to Hilo, but now he realized his mistake. Gosse's friend was walking the guard rail at the pit's edge. "Jeez, Vince."

"Ain't it something?" Vince said. "When the rock melts——"

"Honk your horn, for chrissake. Let's get outta here." Lt. Kocopy shouted through his hands. "Fall in, men!" Tommy wavered on the rail above the sheer drop. "No, goddammit! I mean muster at the bus!"

Somehow they all got back aboard, and afterward there were no more scenic stops, but there were quite a few men sick out the bus windows. Private Willy fell asleep against the big platoon sergeant's shoulder, and when he woke up Vince had stopped on a quiet Hilo side street in front of the Noio Hotel. It was hot, the sun was low, and you could feel a haze of early hang-overs trapped in the bus like exhaust fumes from the motor. Men who were awake did not look as if they enjoyed it, and no one seemed to remember why they had come here.

The Noio Hotel was built square around an open patio, and for a moment in deep shade and headaches Vince's sightseers stood there blinking as if they were back in the Lava Tube. Banana trees screened the lower veranda, but motion at one end of it became identifiable. Then all twenty-four enlisted men from the bus surged in behind Lt. Kocopy at the steps opposite the entrance. A shock of hope was communicated through their collective hang-over, dispelling it. Every man stared fascinated at three women watching their arrival.

They might have been Portuguese, because the proprietor was Portuguese. They had wild black hair and eyes and tantalizing breasts. They were young and apparently connected with the hotel,

yet they had none of the formality shown by hotel girls in Keala-kekua. These three were bold and curious and challenging. The wildest one sighed.

"Well lookit what we get tonight," she said.

Then she turned a little unsteadily and climbed a stairway to the second-story veranda. The platoon sergeant whistled weakly.

"Godalmighty," he said. "Which one is yours, Lieutenant?"

"Honest," Lt. Kocopy said. "I thought this was a kind of YMCA."

The prettiest girl turned and walked into the office, her high heels sharp and explicit on wooden flooring. Then the remaining girl hollered across the patio to the one who had gone upstairs.

"Come on back here and take your bath, Rita."

"Aw spit, Dolores," the one upstairs said. They saw her open a door and inside the room saw two half-dressed marines drinking. Rita went in and closed the door. Then Dolores ran upstairs in a rage of bouncing breasts and whipping skirts, her heels pounding furiously on each step. She disappeared into that room, but they heard her voice.

"You gotta cut it out, Rita, if you're goin' to the dance."

"Aw spit," they heard Rita say.

Then the corpsman whistled, and a soldier sitting in a chair on the street side of the upper veranda leaned toward the group in the patio.

"There's a prophylactic station up the alley," he said lazily.

Lt. Kocopy glanced at the platoon sergeant, but the sergeant slid his hands into his pockets and glazed his face with the non-committal expression of an enlisted man recognizing a dilemma that rank alone has the privilege of solving. Lt. Kocopy stepped onto the veranda.

"All right," he said. "As soon as I assign rooms you're on your own." He cleared his throat and rubbed his smashed nose. "But please, fellows. Don't foul up liberty for the rest of the battalion."

Private Willy washed and tried to clear his head with cold water in a tiny single room on the second floor. He wished Bonelli or Salty Jones were along to help him maneuver one of those

women into a negotiable spot. He did not see how he could manage it by himself against such odds. Maybe the best thing to do was what the platoon sergeant had suggested—get drunk enough not to worry about it. But when he went downtown with the corpsman and another fellow it was too late. Bars were not open after 5:00 P.M. They tried to date a waitress where they had dinner, but that failed, and they could not even find the dance Dolores had mentioned. Finally they promoted a fifth of imitation bourbon from a soldier in a bowling alley and went back to the hotel to drink it in the corpsman's room. At ten o'clock someone told them to put out the light for blackout, then they heard those girls again.

"Getcher dirty hands offa me," Dolores said.

"Oh spit, Dolores," Rita told her. Then all twenty-four touring marines were milling around the dark verandas as though they had arranged to meet the women here at this time. And even if the bars had closed at 5:00 P.M. all the men were drunk for the second time that day.

Private Willy leaned across the railing of the balcony veranda and listened to the hot scramble below. He felt a burn of bad liquor and steeped desire. He did not particularly like the outspoken Rita and Dolores, but the third one was prettiest anyway. He wondered if she would like his big blue eyes if she got a good look at them, and he slipped into the corpsman's room for another slug of courage from the bottle. Then he started along the balcony toward the stairway.

At the corner he stopped. Beside a door at the head of the stairs the big platoon sergeant was standing with a girl. It was the third one, the prettiest one. Willy could tell because the other two were still yelling downstairs. The platoon sergeant had this one backed against the wall and was talking to her in a hoarse whisper, his hands braced on either side of her, his chest lightly against her breasts. The knowledge of their business scalded Private Willy. He stood holding his breath until the sergeant reached down and opened the door. Without a word the girl went inside. The platoon sergeant followed her and closed the door and locked it.

Because you can only hate everything for so long, Willy thought. Then you have to love someone somehow.

He turned and tiptoed along the balcony to the opposite stairway. He went down to the group in the patio around one woman.

"Where's Rita?" Dolores shouted through the male commotion.

"Leave her alone and have yourself some fun," Gosse said.

"Getcher dirty hands offa me," Dolores told him.

"Why so touchy, sugar puss?" someone else said.

"Whatya want for nothin'?" she asked.

"How much does it take?" Willy said thickly.

"You'll get the MPs in here," Dolores screamed. She pushed through the others to bring her face within inches of Willy's. Her violent female being shook him. Her femaleness was so flagrant that its nearness created an impact. "Whatya think this is?" she said.

"I wouldn't know," Willy said.

"Offer her two and six," someone told him.

"Half a pound," Willy said.

"You little squirt." Dolores brushed past him and climbed the stairs, yelling for Rita. Her high heels pounded along the upper veranda and suddenly stopped. "Leggo," she said in a fierce whisper.

Then there was a long time with only men in the patio, most of them passing bottles around although there had been no legitimate source for bottles. It seemed that if you simply held out your hand a bottle would appear in it, and now and then there would be a scramble for one of the female presences reasserting itself in the dark patio like a lickerish radiation that you did not even have to see or hear. Afterward a group would settle down again around bottles to repeat the same old dirty songs they always sang over drinks, until all at once the thing reached a drunken communal animalism.

"Hey chumps," someone yelled on the balcony. "Gang shag."

Ten or fifteen men rushed up the stairs, and Willy found himself in a hot crowded room listening to an argument about precedence. Rita sat half naked on the bed with a bottle to her lips. He could

see her in the light of a flashlight that the corpsman had produced along with dubious professional claims for a medical inspection. The argument grew loud and quite beside the point until suddenly someone was pounding insistently outside the locked door.

"Rita!" Dolores shouted. "Hey, Rita! It's the cops!"

Private Willy felt queasy from too much liquor and too much license. He wanted out of that room. Then a man's voice cut firmly across Dolores'.

"Open up," he said. The room grew quiet except for a giggle from Rita. She pulled down her dress, took another pull from the bottle, then staggered over to open the door. Three native police stood outside. You could see their shiny harness and dark faces.

"Rape!" Rita yelled suddenly. "Rape! Rape!"

"Shut up," one of the cops told her. He came into the room with a flashlight and looked at the men. "What's going on here?"

"Rape! Rape! Rape!" Rita continued in the background until Dolores put a hand over her mouth.

"Rape, hell," Gosse said. "I paid her good money a while ago."

"He's got a receipt," Tommy said helpfully.

"Well you boys clear out and go to bed," the cop told them.

"It's only a little coming-ashore party," the corpsman said.

"But you've kept the whole street awake." The cop stepped aside and motioned with his light. "Now break it up like good boys."

"Oh fudge," someone funny said. "Just before refreshments."

But they went quietly, and then Willy lay in his own room listening to the footsteps of cops checking the verandas. His bed began to go round, and he had to stare at the dim rectangle of window to keep himself stationary. He was not sleepy because he had been too much stirred up by what went on in this hotel, yet he did not know how to gain anything for himself. He thought of a joke about a dishonorable discharge, but he did not laugh. When the cops went away he got up and took off his shirt and washed his face, then went out onto the balcony again. Across the patio he heard a fierce whisper from Dolores, an insistent whisper by a marine, and finally the closing of a door. Then he heard nothing

except crickets until a lock turned softly and someone came toward him from the platoon sergeant's room.

There was an alcoholic logic to it, as if when you reached a certain drunkenness anything became possible. It was the third girl, the prettiest one, carrying her shoes. He stepped in front of her.

"Oh," she said, stopping still. "You scared me."

"I was waiting," he said and swayed unsteadily toward her.

"But it's so late. You should be in bed."

"I've got a single room. Come with me."

Her dark eyes appeared unaccountably familiar. She was so close that he could hardly keep from reaching out and pulling her tight against him, yet he did not want the cops here again. Then she smiled, and he remembered the girl called Violet at Pearl Harbor. There was a similarity, if only in the duskiness of their flesh and easy acceptance of a man's longing. At any rate she made him believe in the welcome of Hawaii, and suddenly her breasts brushed his bare chest. He gasped.

"You're cute," she said. "But I think you're pretty drunk."

Then he held her and kissed her until she dropped a shoe loudly.

"Please," he whispered desperately.

"Poor guy," she said. "Poor kid. All right."

In the darkness of his room he trembled uncontrollably untying his shoes and did not care who else might have been welcomed ashore by her. Then she was frankly receptive and unashamed, and all that mattered was the vital affirmation of life in her warm flesh.

6

The next evening in camp he tried to tell Salty Jones about it, but sex is between two people and loses everything when it loses intimacy. Peripheral details sounded dull, so it did not add up to much.

"Anyhow I wish you'd been along," he said. "It was a bust till we got to Volcano House, but I had a happy birthday after all."

"When was your birthday, Andy?"

"Today. I'm eighteen now."

He had remembered it in Honokaa, the last stop on their return to camp. Salty thought they should go to the Kamuela Kafe for additional celebration with Leeper and Bonelli, but Willy was tired and no longer felt that maturity arrived with birthdays anyway.

So Salty kept on reading a pocket novel in the light of a gasoline lantern they had acquired, and Willy lay on his cot considering this brief violent pleasure instead of Tarawa's recent violence. And as he thought about it an odd transposition took place.

The girl in his arms last night became Judy Powell. It was Judy he loved after all. Only she should justify such passion and fulfillment, otherwise it diminished. Somehow it had to be Judy, in spite of the fact that even now she remained virginal and pure. Her dark eyes, her smile, had been the familiar element on the veranda last night, and in the heavy haze of alcohol he had not recognized it.

He had almost never thought of her lately, yet now he needed her so badly—to touch her, to hold her, to tell her how much he honestly loved her—that he sat up as if startled.

"What's the matter?" Salty asked, looking around his book.

"Oh nothing." Willy stood up. "Guess I'd better write a letter."

So for the first time since Tarawa he wrote to her, and for the first time overseas he wrote without caring what the censor read.

JUDY MY DARLING:

It's a long time since I wrote, but not because I've forgotten you. Like on Tarawa I don't always have a chance to write, and sometimes I miss you so much I don't dare think about you. Sometimes it seems like a hundred years since we were together, and other times it's like you're right here with me and I have to fight to keep myself from talking out loud to you and making the guys think I've gone asiatic.

We'll have to be married the minute I get back, Judy. But I guess that won't be for quite a while yet. It's a long ways to Tokyo, and I only hope you'll be able to love me all that time, because I count on it more than anything in the world. I know it's hard for you to wait, but you said we were too young before, and

this will make us older for sure. Don't let me spoil your fun, but think of me once in a while.

That's about all for tonight. I can't tell you where we are now, but it's awful without you. Write more often and I'll try to do the same. And please don't let any dogface at the USO get you.

All my love,

ANDY

Hunger is insolent, and will be fed.

chapter 5

1

She got the letter Saturday evening when she came home from work. It was on the buffet where her mother always put her mail, but her mother called from the kitchen to tell her it was there.

"All right," she said. "I'm home, Mom."

"I'll have supper ready in a minute," her mother said.

"No hurry. I'm not very hungry."

She carried the letter upstairs and laid it on her dresser while she went to the bathroom to gargle with an aspirin. She thought she might have a touch of cat fever because she was so tired. In the mirror her face looked pale, the upper half of it nothing but big black eyes—a twenty-five-year-old face, she decided.

She worked Saturdays at the Crescent department store, went to business school the rest of the week, and filled in at the USO. She wondered if she ought to skip the USO dance tonight but knew she would not. Running a comb through her hair she remembered the letter from Andy.

It probably wasn't important. None of his letters were. She knew there was censorship and all that and tried to read between the lines, but nothing much came of it. His reserve was stricter than

censorship called for, and it hurt her. She had refused to marry him, but he should have understood. She had entangled herself with no one else. She was honestly waiting for him, even though it was not especially hard to wait since most fellows her age had entered service and the servicemen she met were here today and gone tomorrow. Yet she would have liked unqualified evidence of a true and living love affair.

She went to her room and sat down on the bed to open the letter. She read it without immediately appreciating its increased warmth. "Sometimes it seems like a hundred years since we were together," he said. That was exactly the way it seemed to her. She could barely picture Andrew Willy as he had been with her in high school, let alone now as a marine in an unmentionable foreign land. "We'll have to be married the minute I get back," he said. Even that made no firm imprint on the trackless expanse of a year's separation already with more to come. It all seemed quite improbable.

She laid the letter in her lap, brushed the hair from her temples, and closed her aching eyes. It's from Andy, she told herself. He says he still loves me, yet I sit here like a lump. She read the letter again, but instead of identifying him at present she kept groping for the Andrew Willy who had taken her to proms and walked her home from school. That was the only Andy she knew.

"Judy," her mother called from the foot of the stairs, her voice singsong and soothing. "Supper's waiting, honey."

She left the open letter on her dresser and went downstairs. Her father was on a run and would not be home until tomorrow, so her mother had set the table in the kitchen for the two of them. She was already at her place nearest the stove, and Judy stopped to kiss her forehead. They seldom saw each other except at mealtimes. When the three of them were there together it was almost a special event.

"Do you feel all right, dear?" Mrs. Powell said as Judy sat down opposite her. "You look sort of drawn tonight."

"I've got a little headache," Judy said. "I took an aspirin."

"Why not stay home? You're simply worn out."

"Not really, Mom. You look tired too."

"I am." She made bandages for the Red Cross each Saturday. "But I'm through for the day. Why don't you skip the dance this once?"

"They never have enough girls on Saturday night. Dancing with a headache is no great sacrifice in this day and age."

"But you might be catching flu or something."

"Don't heckle me, Mom. I'll sleep late tomorrow."

Mrs. Powell shrugged and broke her salad apart with her fork. She never said so directly, but Judy knew she worried about the USO. Her father grumbled about it constantly because he did not trust any serviceman after watching their behavior on his trains. He wanted Judy to be a nurse's aide. Maybe that would be more useful, yet she liked to think of the USO helping Andrew Willy have a bit of fun on lonely nights.

She drank some milk and ate a few bites of fish. They often had fish when her father was gone, saving meat points to use while he was home.

"Andy finally wrote again," she said then. Her parents were always interested in Andy, although she had never told them of his proposal and her definite intention of marrying him.

"Where is he now?" Mrs. Powell asked.

"He couldn't tell me," Judy said. "But he had been at Tarawa."

"Good heavens." Mrs. Powell put down her fork. "Is he all right?"

"I guess so." Her mother's concern surprised Judy. Until then Tarawa had been no more than an exotic name to her. "He didn't say much on account of censorship. Was Tarawa pretty awful?"

"It must have been, according to the papers." Her mother looked so distressed that Judy felt upset. Older people apparently got more out of newspaper stories than she did. "Didn't he give you any idea of what the battle was like? How close he got to it?"

"No," Judy said. What had he told her besides what she should have known, that he loved her? "He probably didn't want to think about it. I wish I understood what it's like over there, Mom."

"We can't begin to imagine," Mrs. Powell said. She picked up her fork, still frowning with concern. "Just be cheerful in your letters to him. Pleasant news from home must mean a lot to them."

"I'll write as soon as we finish supper."[†]

She felt better after eating and helping with the dishes. Then she pressed her formal and did her nails and forgot all about Andy until she had showered and gone to her room to dress. She saw his letter on the dresser and glanced at her body in the mirror and blushed at a vague thought of Andy and intimacy. But then she had to hurry to catch her ride and postponed writing to her true love overseas.

2

The streets were icy. Driving had to be slow, and they were late getting to the old Federal Land Bank which the USO had taken over. You could hear the orchestra from the back door. It was fairly good, a bit like Glenn Miller in its small way. Judy liked it, except that it destroyed her illusion of coming here for impersonal patriotic service to her country. There was always more excitement to it than she planned for. Boys dancing with her rarely mentioned the sweethearts, home, and mother they were supposed to have endlessly on their minds.

She let the others of her group go on ahead because she needed a moment to brace herself for the disconcerting effect of too many male eyes inspecting her too personally. She stood at a cloakroom mirror and pretended to erase a smear of lipstick, thinking of morale and Andrew Willy and diverse contributions necessary to winning the war. The USO was an eminently wholesome effort, so why should it disturb her?

When she turned from the mirror Ruby Haig was watching her.

"Hi, honey," Ruby said. "You look real sweet."

"Hello," Judy said and could not help blushing. Her group never spoke to Ruby Haig. They said she used the USO to pick up fellows, that she was married and deceiving her husband, and that

she had a child although she was not married. Judy believed none of this gossip, since USO girls must be carefully screened, yet Ruby's appearance made any of it seem possible.

She looked coarse and insincere. Her peroxide blondness was obviously peroxide blondness. She used too much powder and rouge. Her lips stuck together at the corners from too much orange lipstick. Her bosom was shamelessly big, and she did nothing to disguise the fact. She seemed hard clear through and indifferent to anyone's morale, yet good-looking men always tagged her around the dance floor. Judy had thought her much older than herself, but now she saw that the impression came not from Ruby's actual age but from an aura of experience.

They were alone in the cloakroom, and Judy did not want to be rude by hurrying out. She smiled brightly but felt as if Ruby were staring with open pity at her innocence.

"Look, honey," Ruby said. Her voice was rough and husky. "You're a nice kid. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't all right."

"What's that?" Judy said.

"A personal favor. A gyrene out there's given' me a bad time, and I'd like to get him interested in somebody else."

Judy stiffened. She wanted nothing to do with Ruby's affairs.

"I couldn't neglect the others," she said.

"Look, honey." Ruby forced a smile. "It's for the good of the cause. He's only a kid himself, but bitter. Lost an eye in the Pacific and wants to drink himself to death. I'm the wrong type for him." She said it matter-of-factly and shrugged slightly. "Show him a little attention and he won't waste his time on me."

"Oh dear," Judy said. Wounded and bitter ones frightened her. She knew it was a weakness, but she preferred newly inducted ones or ones who had stayed stateside. Visible scars and something invisible in those who had seen combat made her shrink. She realized that Ruby faced scars without flinching, and maybe it was a courage you should cultivate. She felt Ruby reading her private shortcomings and did not want to be condemned for them. "I'd like to," she said. "But——"

"He's really a swell guy and sober tonight." Ruby spoke with

wry mildness. "Lives here in Spokane, and I knew him before he went overseas. His name's Beecher Neal. You might've met him before."

"I don't think so."

"I'll introduce you then. Just let him see how nice you are."

Ruby took her arm as if the matter were settled. It would have been childish to hang back. You offered yourself here for the benefit of all fighting men alike, within chaperoned limits, and in this building you were perfectly safe. Yet as Ruby led her into the crowd at the edge of the dance floor, Judy felt subtly threatened. She saw Betty Northrop gape at her in surprise and nudge Katherine Thomas. It annoyed her. They had no right to feel superior to anyone trying to help.

"That's him," Ruby said. "The marine by the bandstand."

She stopped and pointed. Most of the servicemen were soldiers or sailors, so Judy had no trouble spotting the marine. At first he appeared to be the handsomest man she had ever seen. He stood at a kind of insolent parade rest with his hands behind his back. They started toward him, but before they got there Judy saw the wound. It was his left eye. Only the right half of his face was still handsome. The other side was scarred through the eyebrow and down the cheek. Beneath that bisected eyebrow the eye was round and still as though in mortal pain, and Judy could hardly bear it. To her, blindness was worse than anything.

But when they stopped in front of him she saw that his other eye was wary and probing, as if doing double duty and doing it well. It allowed no pity for the other half of his face. The insolence there was as great as in the position of his body, and you were not sure but what even with one eye disfigured he remained the best-looking man in the room. The trouble was that he made you resent it.

"Beecher, I want you to meet a friend of mine," Ruby said. She almost matched his insolence with her voice. "Judy Powell."

"How do you do," Judy said.

"Glad to know you." He slid his good eye once down her front, then turned to Ruby. "How about a dance?"

"I've got this one." Ruby raised her hand to Judy's arm briefly. "Here's the best dancer in town anyway. Have fun."

And Ruby turned away, not smiling, her introduction finished.

"Nice try," Beecher called after her. "But I still don't intend to play second fiddle to a dogface."

Judy was angry and embarrassed and wished she could walk away from him too. His scar did not frighten her half as much now as the meaning of his extra-USO connection with Ruby. There obviously was more to this than wholesome companionship on a dance floor. She was ashamed of being involved and held there by a shaken sense of duty. Beecher Neal was the type of serviceman her father ranted about. He no more appreciated wholesome companionship than he did her mother's time and effort in making Red Cross bandages for his wounds. He was scarred and scarred deep and wanted no one's help or sympathy.

But he was looking at her again with his good eye. She realized that her USO smile had continued to function although it was strained. Now she should say something jolly, but the look of mortal pain in his left eye and probing of his right eye struck her both at once and confused her. You could not ignore either half of him, and the whole was something else again—human and contradictory.

He stepped closer and raised his arms.

"Sorry," he said. "Don't let it throw you. Let's dance."

He danced so well that she followed in surprise for a few moments without resenting his manners. He held her firmly and did not jitterbug. She began to relax, reminding herself that soon someone would tag her and she could forget Beecher Neal. But when the music ended she was still with him. As they stepped apart she saw his scarred eye and felt new panic.

"Where are you from?" she asked automatically.

"Here," he said as if he knew she had known. "Spokane."

"Furlough?" she asked brightly.

"Getting discharged," he said.

"Oh." Her ineptness dismayed her. She hated asking wrong questions yet had to talk. "Where were you wounded?"

"New Georgia. Ever hear of it?"

"Oh yes." She had heard many names like Tarawa and New Georgia. They meant nothing more than unaccountable places where unaccountable things happened. "South Pacific, isn't it?"

All at once he smiled, viciously.

"The beautiful South Pacific," he said. "Coconuts, romance, Dorothy Lamour. Know how I lost this eye? A flip of a sarong when I got fresh."

His bitterness was corrosive, but she kept smiling.

"What will you do now that you're out?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Not a damned thing. I've done my share."

Trumpets hit a fast new beat with an incisive blast. Beecher pulled her roughly to him. She felt the wool of his uniform and hardness of his body inside it and all at once clung to him possessively. What was an eye when he had the rest of himself? She felt his cheek against her hair and knew it was his good one but wished it was his scarred one in order to touch his hurt directly and show him that she could accept a small disfigurement as well as anyone. He did not have to go to cheap blondes for an antidote to war. She was willing now to shed her false smile and meet him on serious ground.

He emphasized the music's rhythm with hardly any movement. Just as she started to praise his dancing an army corporal cut in on them.

"Do you mind?" the corporal said. Beecher stepped back.

"I guess not," he said. "It's a dogface world anyway."

"We can't all be heroes," the corporal said.

She expected a brawl, but Beecher merely nodded to her and walked off through dancing couples as if he were deaf too and too proud to care. She turned on her USO smile again and faced the corporal.

There were no scars on him. He was sly and square-faced with both eyes intact, grinning as he waited for her to start building his morale.

"Hi," she said. "My name's Judy."

"Call me Gil," he said. "What's with your seagoing bellhop?"

"Hit by a sarong," she said, and felt guilty at this flippancy. But apparently they preferred flippancy. "Where are you from?"

"Springfield, Mo.," Gil said and whirled her off among the other couples. His dancing was more frisky than Beecher's, but she followed easily and enjoyed the change of pace until she saw Beecher cutting in on Ruby Haig and a lanky sailor. For some reason she resented it, even though they appeared suited to one another in an objectionable sort of way. Something in each of them seemed a regrettable match for faults in the other. They showed no sign of pleasure in being together, yet her knowledge of their crude intimacy made them look abnormally aware of one another. But it was none of her business, and the corporal was working hard to get acquainted.

"Have you been overseas?" she asked him.

"Not this kid," he said.

"I suppose it won't be long though?"

"It will be if I've got anything to say about it."

"Do you have anything to say about it?"

"There's usually an angle. I'm working on one."

"More power to you. They say it gets rough over there."

"You know it, baby. This is my kind of duty."

He was a paratrooper or air corpsman or something. She never remembered exactly what anyone did in the Army, and he was not interested in talking shop anyway. At the end of the dance he suggested they have a Coke. She followed him to the snack bar and was glad to sit down for a while. They sat side by side at a small table facing the dance floor. His knee pressed against hers in a way that might have been accidental, and she did not want to seem a prude by moving. This Gil was swaggeringly attractive. He had the physical competence to back up a swagger, and it gave her a sense of feminine competence. But after drinking part of his Coke he said one of those things that always bothered her.

"Let's blow this joint."

"Don't you like it?" she asked.

"What's to like about it once you've met the right gal?"

"Well honestly," she said. They were never satisfied. It was a

fine dance with good music, lots of girls, refreshments; yet they always wanted to go somewhere else. She tried to sound sophisticated and sure of herself. "You know I can't leave now."

"Why not?"

"The rules, for heaven's sake."

"Nuts." He was laughing at her with his eyes. They were very brown eyes, like her own, but incurably devilish. She could not deny a brash appeal in him. "You aren't in a nunnery, baby," he said. "How about afterwards then?"

It was no accident about his knee either. She felt flustered.

"Where would we go?"

"I've got a room." He wet his lips and spoke softly. "We could have a few drinks some place. You know."

She did not know. It was flattering to have him think she did, but in spite of her recent brush with Beecher Neal and Ruby Haig she refused to speculate on the mechanics of such affairs.

"We aren't allowed to make dates," she said.

"It's a free country. We'd have a helluva time."

"No. I couldn't. I'm sorry."

She rose to get away from his knee. Then she wished they had remained seated. The pressure of his body as he danced became more disturbing than just his knee. They were cut in on by a bashful sailor who could barely dance at all, and after that it was a relief to have Gil tag her again during the next dance. From then on it was a game. Judy never took more than a few steps with another partner before Gil reclaimed her. He would cut in with exaggerated politeness as if they were strangers, but as soon as they danced away together they laughed like conspirators and whirled through the crowd like long-time partners. The evening went fast with someone congenial, although Gil made a sly game of insisting on a date too. If he came to these dances often enough, she thought she might eventually ask him to her house. It was hardly fair of her father to condemn out of hand every man in uniform. Some of them must be ordinary hometown boys.

She was dancing with a clumsy Texas soldier and hoping Gil would hurry to her rescue when a hand reached in from behind her

and tapped the soldier's shoulder. She turned immediately, but instead of Gil she saw Beecher Neal. He was smiling at her, and all at once she felt inadequate again. With a smile on his face the scar became an appealing blur to an otherwise incredible handsomeness. Maybe it was a condescending smile, yet it struck her as a proud front for wounded dignity. She thanked the clumsy soldier for his dance, then Beecher took her in his arms and began his restrained dancing.

"You're mighty popular," he said quite nicely.

"Oh, we all are. You seem to be feeling better."

"Do I? Maybe I'm drunk on Coke."

"Do you have to be drunk to feel good?"

"It helps. Didn't you guess I was pretty asiatic?"

"Well, we got sort of thrown together at first."

"You should've steered clear. Ruby isn't in your league."

"She only asked me to dance with a marine."

"Marines aren't your type either."

"Just what do you think my type is?"

He drew his head back. His good eye searched her carefully, as though at last he were recognizing an individual.

"You shouldn't even be here," he said. "These wolves aren't looking for a sweet little sister. Ask Ruby what it's all about."

"Oh please." She was exasperated. "I'm not a baby."

"No." He was amused. "But you're hardly round-heeled."

"What do you mean?"

"Skip it." He drew her close again. "Where do you live?"

She told him because it seemed natural to tell someone who also lived in Spokane and had taken her seriously for a moment. The fun she had been having with a corporal called Gil suddenly seemed vapid. All at once she was tired of passing from hand to hand like a borrowed toy. She was tired of strangers and strenuous evenings of patriotic duty. She wanted to belong to someone in particular, someone who lived where she did and did not long for another hometown while waiting to be shipped away from all hometowns into those unaccountable battlefields. This marine had made it back—maimed, half blind, bitter—but at least you did not have

to suppress a sneaking fear that he would be dead before you saw him again. She wondered why Beecher Neal gave her such a feeling of possessiveness.

Her legs were perfectly aligned with his as they moved to the music. Their bodies swayed in a kind of mutual testing of responses, and it was incredibly sad somehow. People did not have to be lonely, yet they usually managed it one way or another. Body to body you still did not know what really went on inside someone else. She closed her eyes and wondered what Beecher was thinking while holding her.

Then Gil cut in again. She did not realize it until Beecher stopped moving, but when she opened her eyes she saw the corporal's sly face.

"May I?" he asked with mock formality.

"The wolf pack is closing in again," Beecher said. He did not let her go so readily this time. He ignored the corporal and winked at her with his good eye. His bisected left eyebrow seemed a mark of distinction. "Ruby was right about your dancing, kid. I'll see you around."

"Are you leaving?" Judy asked.

"I was on my way when you sailed by. Be careful."

He walked toward the outer door without looking back. Then she was whirled away by Gil, but her legs ached and she was nearly exhausted.

"I thought there was no favoritism in service clubs," Gil said.

"But the marines are so outnumbered." She was unable to smile at his banter any more and put her head against his cheek to keep him from seeing her face. "Besides, he isn't my favorite."

"Am I?" The corporal tightened his arms and slowed his dancing to an insinuating glide. She was painfully conscious of him.

"Of course not," she said. "There isn't time for favorites."

"I'm nuts about you," he whispered.

"Don't be silly."

When the orchestra played its good-night number she was still dancing with him. Everyone else had gathered at the door to say good night. Suddenly Gil stopped and held her in both arms as

though he were going to kiss her. It had been a long time since she had been kissed, and all at once she was weak with wanting it.

"Meet me at the Davenport in fifteen minutes," he said.

Their lips were only inches apart. Her heart beat wildly. His demand was insistent. For hours she had accepted public intimacy with him, and now she needed private intimacy to understand herself and all of this better. Why ask Ruby what it was about? Why not follow her own instincts to the heart of an extraordinarily commonplace matter?

But she pulled back and broke his close hold on her.

"No," she said. "It's been so much fun. Do come to our next dance."

3

Her head ached again as she rode home with her friends. Their chatter about cute sailors and handsome soldiers sounded childishly imperceptive to her, and she was glad to get out at her corner.

It was just starting to snow as the car drove off. She stepped onto the curb beneath the street light and turned her face up to let scattered flakes cool her skin.

She nearly screamed when a man moved from the shadow of the bare elm in her yard and caught her arm.

"Don't go in yet," he said.

In an overcoat and cap he looked menacing. She would hardly have recognized him without his sly grin.

"Gil," she said. "How on earth did you get here?"

"Took a taxi. It's waiting in the next block, sugar."

"But how did you know where I live?"

"What does it matter? They don't all believe in rules down there. Come on, beautiful. Let's take a ride."

He pulled her into his arms as if he were cutting in on the dance floor once more. But now they were quite alone, and his lips brushed her cheek before she drew her head aside.

"You've got to go," she said. "My folks will be furious."

"They don't have to know."

"They'll hear us," she told him, realizing that her father was gone and her mother's room was at the back of the house. Her mother seldom heard her come in. It would be easy to slip away for an hour or so.

"Let's take a quick trip down to my room," he said.

"I can't."

"Why not, baby?"

"It's not right. You shouldn't have come here."

"A guy's supposed to call on his girl."

"Oh please, Gil. This isn't fair."

"It's all in the game, sugar."

And suddenly he kissed her very hard on the mouth. For a moment she was thrilled, then it became too much. Never in her life had she been kissed like that. She felt raw passion like a mercurial substance in her mouth. She both responded and resisted, struggling as much against herself as against him. But she had no strength. His arms kept her locked to him. His sheer bulk in that overcoat seemed overwhelming. She writhed against him, trying to break away, yet only made his kiss more insistent.

Finally he took a breath but did not release her.

"God, honey," he said. "Let's go. I've been nuts about you ever since I saw you. What's wrong with a little loving?"

"It isn't love," she said. "Let me go."

"We're made for each other."

He kissed her again rudely, keeping his mouth to hers no matter how she twisted, trying to crush the barrier of coats between their bodies.

"Stop," she said at last, gasping. "This is awful."

"Why? You weren't bashful about dancing with me."

"That was different."

"Why different? It drove me nuts wanting you."

"But there's somebody else. I'm in love with someone else."

"That snotty marine?"

"Someone overseas."

"Then he can't do you any good. I've got what you want."

"I don't want anything. Just let go of me."

"You're kidding yourself, baby."

"I'm not. I didn't ask you to come here."

"You gave me plenty of come-on at the dance."

"I only danced like we're supposed to."

"Do you think a guy gets the works by dancing?"

"Don't. Please."

"Was it all a tease act?"

"You'll wake the whole neighborhood."

"Who cares? You give me a come-on, then don't let me touch you."

"I didn't do anything wrong. What did you expect?"

"I expected you. I played hard for you. Now give, dammit."

"Let me go."

"Why you stinking little bitch."

He turned loose of her abruptly, and she nearly fell. He stepped close again and spit his words at her.

"You good little girls," he said. "You goddamn sweet good little girls. You flaunt it under our nose perfumed to high heaven and wrapped in satin, then squeal like a stuck pig when we want it delivered. Why in hell don't you stay out of sight if you won't follow through?"

She stared at him as though he had struck her, understanding his words less than feeling their sting. His face had gone ugly. She could not believe he was the same corporal who had appealed to her with playfulness at the USO. He almost snarled now, and she could not believe that those very lips had tempted her a while ago. Were all men frauds? Or had she actually grown up without realizing exactly what desire meant?

"Don't," she said. "I can't help it."

"Then go kiss yourself good night and drop dead."

He turned furiously and walked away from the light and out of sight while she stood in the slow fall of new snow, shocked. She shivered and took a deep breath that sounded like a sob. Then she turned and ran to the house as if he might come back.

For a long time Judy lay fully dressed across her bed, waiting to cry and get it over with. But she felt empty, like a well gone dry.

At first she had thought of waking her mother and crawling into bed with her for reassurance, yet she had not. Gil was gone, danger was gone, she was intact. The house sheltered her as usual, unaltered by that burst of passion out front. There was no need to worry her mother. She had turned on the lamp in her room, taken off her coat, and collapsed across the bed.

But the memory of the corporal and his kisses lasted, as if the experience were pressed into a living wax which was herself and which contained this whole thing in minute detail like a performance on a phonograph record. It repeated itself over and over within her from his first appearance at the dance to his disappearance down the street. She honestly felt no revulsion for him, yet shouldn't she? Hadn't he all but raped her?

She stared at the ruffled shade of the lamp on her dresser. Her room was papered gaily in a flower pattern, and the furnishings were a chaste white with similar blue flowers. Until this very minute she had liked the room, but what would her corporal say about it—the man who objected to perfume and satin? *You goddamn sweet good little girls . . .*

It was not being explosively desired that she resented, it was being turned on and called filthy names for not submitting. But what was she supposed to do now—hate him, fear him, laugh at him, forget him? She tried them all with no success. She called herself deceitful, teasing, dishonest; none of them fit. She tried to believe his kisses had repelled her, but that was grossly false. Desire lingered even now. How was a good girl supposed to react?

Thou Shalt Not. That's all they ever said. They never told you how to keep your senses from responding normally.

And what was normal? Did all those fellows come to the USO with one purpose in mind, only some of them like the corporal bold enough to declare it? Was plain unadorned sex their object?

She hated the clinical bluntness of the word sex, but it might be the truest word for this. Her father's mistrust of servicemen indicated it. Beecher had warned her; the corporal had proven his point. And in that case was Ruby Haig a better person than Judy for recognizing and meeting the demand frankly?

She closed her eyes and rubbed her bare arms along the tufts of the chenille bedspread. She felt tired to the core, tired from a very long day and from supporting a virtue that seemed as hollow as herself.

Yet which was truly wrong—to deny passion or give in to it? Maybe in secret there were no *Thou Shalt Nots*. Obviously the corporal's kisses were practiced and telling, and maybe she had done something rare in stopping him. Judy did not consider herself a prude but never discussed these fine points with friends. She knew nothing of their behavior under temptation—or was the corporal's exhibition somehow unique?

She compared him to Beecher Neal, the marine. They were not alike, yet Beecher's connection with Ruby implied something that could no more be called love than what the corporal had attempted. And speaking of love, where did it enter this tangle of sensual hungers? Was it simply a word used by adults to disguise the bald basic urge?

She could not believe it. Repeating the scene in front of her house once more with the army corporal replaced by the marine, she had a strange feeling that she would give in to Beecher Neal if his lips and tongue insisted. She did not know why, except that he had looked into her seriously for a moment and seen her innocence without scorning it. And he had been hurt. You had good reason to love someone who had been severely hurt. Scars after all were nothing to fear if the man beneath them was essentially sound. The corporal had not suffered, probably never would, and there was nothing to love in anyone who merely wanted to satisfy himself. And even if Beecher wasted himself on women like Ruby Haig, there was certainly more to him than the corporal's singleness of purpose—a pride, a dignity, a depth that assumed hardness

did not quite hide. She remembered his restrained dancing, the way he had held her firmly but with respect as though his bitterness and her innocence might protect each other if they took the trouble to try.

Yes, love could exist in the confusion. It could catch up with you if it had a chance. Maybe Beecher had realized it too and would come to see how she looked without a USO smile. He knew where she lived. Some night he might feel lonely and . . .

But what was she thinking? Why a marine named Beecher Neal? She opened her eyes and sat up, blinking at the light.

There was Andrew Willy. She had nearly forgotten poor Andy. His letter lay on the dresser where she had left it, and above it in the frame of the mirror was his picture. She got up and went to look at him. It was one of those cheap pictures you get in sidewalk booths while you wait. He had sent it from San Diego last summer. He wore a uniform that did not seem to belong to him. He was trying to smile for the camera but looked about ten years old and scared stiff. She took the picture down and held it under the light. His button nose robbed him of force, and he failed to come alive for her. He stared out of the photograph as a faded and unnatural caricature of a marine, with no trace of the vitality in Gil or Beecher.

Abruptly she crumpled the picture in her hand and felt ashamed. It was not fair to compare Andrew Willy after a year's absence with two fellows she had just left. It was not fair to see him as a faded photograph when he was full of life somewhere. It was wrong to let him slip out of mind simply because he was far away. If he should be wounded like Beecher, or worse, she would never forgive this abominable war.

She knelt on the stool before the dresser in an effort to concentrate. But even with her eyes closed and the photograph destroyed she could not picture Andrew Willy in the flesh. He had become disembodied, meaningless, a cheap photo. Was he—had he ever been—capable of the corporal's passion? They had necked like all high-school kids, in the backs of cars and on her front porch. It

had been moderately pleasing, but indirect and furtive and a bit messy. It had never shaken her to the roots as the corporal's kisses had done tonight.

Yet apart from that sort of thing there had surely been something warm and significant between them. It must have been love. It must still mean more than heady encounters with strangers. Or had fighting and being away changed Andy too? Did she know what he was any more?

She did not know what anyone was any more, including herself. Andrew Willy had brought her up short on the brink of maturity with a proposal of marriage, then abandoned her. Now she floundered between one world and another like a half-evolved amphibian, neither crawling nor swimming. A girl or a woman? She opened her eyes and stared at herself in the mirror. Short hair, big eyes, pale skin, full lips—innocence. She stood up. A long neck, white throat, small breasts—innocence. Where were her qualifications for adulthood and marriage? She unfastened her gown and slipped it off, then her underclothes. Without perfume or satin she stared at herself in the mirror and saw nothing to drive anyone wild. An arrangement of flesh over bones like a million others. Why should one want it for his pleasure, another for his wife?

She shivered and put on her warm pajamas. Then she sat down to read Andy's letter again. "Judy my darling . . . I only hope you'll be able to love me all that time, because I count on it more than . . ."

Even his words did not bring Andrew Willy alive for her. It hurt to fail him, and all at once the dry well of herself filled with hot fluid. Tears brimmed into her eyes, then she leaned across his letter and cried wretchedly. It was so hopeless. The world rushed forward in a cloud of war and lust and daily conflict that gave you no chance to learn what it was about or how to cope with it. Before you were through being a child you were a woman. Before you were through being a woman you would probably be dead. A year ago she had been unable to understand this urgency in Andrew Willy and had driven him overseas. Tonight she had glimpsed his

needs through utter strangers, but her opportunity to help him was lost. She had loved him once, but now he might come back changed beyond recognition. He might never come back, and she cried for the whole mess of war and people's failure to understand one another.

But that did no good at all. In a moment she straightened up and choked off her sobs. At least she could be constructive. She dried her eyes on her pajama sleeve, then went to the bathroom to blow her nose and get ready for bed. Returning to her room she took stationery and a pen from the dresser and began writing. "Dearest Andy." The very least she could do was save herself for him, and she wrote as if by putting it on paper immediately she would remove all temptation to the contrary forever.

I was so glad to hear from you today and know you are all right after that dreadful Tarawa battle. Because I am waiting for you—I do love you with all my heart. I feel terribly wrong now about not accepting you last January, but there's no use crying over spilt milk.

This war is terrible, Andy. It hurts people in so many ways besides actual wounds, like losing an eye for example. I pray it will be over sooner than you think, because I don't believe I could stand another year like this last one. I need you here with me.

Mother told me to be cheerful, but I'm not, am I? Somehow there's nothing to be very cheerful about. I go to USO dances hoping it will make the boys a little happier and bring you a bit closer, but it never turns out right. None of them are as good as you, and some of them think a few dances mean a love affair. It's so wrong, but then nothing is quite right since you went away.

Don't change, Andy. You were always rather sober and serious, but don't let it get twisted and nasty—like some of the fellows I've seen. No matter how bad it is, I'm always with you in my thoughts. Write as often as you can, and tell me as much about it as you can. Wherever you are think of me, and above all take care of yourself.

I love you.
JUDY

*But now, ye warriors, take a short repast;
And, well refresh'd, to bloody conflict haste.*

chapter 6

1

In February Private Willy became a private first class. At the same time Louis Bonelli was also promoted to that rank, and Private First Class Solomon Jones to corporal. They each sewed new chevrons on a couple of shirts, but that was all the difference it made.

2

"How do you feel?" Doc Frechette asked when he came into the tent.

Lt. McGhee opened his eyes and tried to focus them.

"Like hell," he said. Frechette laughed.

"I mean aside from your conscience?"

"Both physically and morally like hell," McGhee said.

"Didn't the codeine help?"

"No. Neither my head nor my conscience."

He closed his eyes, afraid the effort of speech would uproot his stomach again. Frechette's second short laugh increased the nausea, as if noise too were an emetic.

"You must have done it up brown," Frechette said.

"I did."

"How'd you find the dame?"

"Maybe she came out of the bottle like a genie."

"Dark?"

"White."

"Dorothy Lamour?"

"Lana Turner."

Frechette whistled, and McGhee felt him sit at the end of the cot.

"Then she must have come out of a bottle," Frechette said.

McGhee turned carefully onto his side and seemed to feel blood in his head ooze slowly into his eye sockets.

"I wish it was hallucination," he said.

"Judging from the hang-over, I'd say there was a good chance."

"No. Hand me my pants."

"We've got bedpans if you'd move over to sick bay."

"No, no. I just want to prove it."

Frechette reached for the khaki pants hanging on a nail in the stringer behind the cot. Lt. McGhee opened his eyes to check the position of his steel helmet on the deck. It was within range. Then he took the pants from the doctor and found a slip of paper in one of the pockets.

"Her Hilo address," he said. He dropped the pants to the wooden deck and held the slip for Frechette to read. Afterward he tore the paper to pieces, dropped the scraps beside his pants, and lay back down. "The trouble is," he said, "I haven't forgotten it so far."

"You'll be glad you remembered it next liberty."

"I'd hate myself more than I do today."

"Oh, it's not that bad."

"You didn't see her, Doc."

"I've seen Lana Turner."

"Then you know real ones aren't like movie queens."

"They'll do in a pinch."

"But why did I have to go overboard at a time like this?"

"You wouldn't take liberty before."

"I shouldn't have taken it this time."

"You had good grounds for a celebration."

"Celebration hell. It was an orgy."

"Don't complain. Every time I go to Kona Inn it's all male."

"That's what I thought. That's what everyone told me, but look who has the next room to mine. She wouldn't have a thing to do with Kocopy."

"Can't say I blame her."

"But why me? I told her I was married."

"Did you mention the brand-new son?"

"We drank to him a dozen times."

"Maybe she has a complex and thought you'd do as much for her."

"Oh knock it off, Doc. It isn't funny."

"It's no tragedy either."

"Why isn't it?" McGhee braced himself on one elbow in spite of pain and nausea. "The first day I know my first child is born I rush out and take on the first woman I meet for my first taste of adultery."

"Take it easy, chum." Frechette did not laugh. "You were drunk, so your moral defenses were down. Alcohol does that."

McGhee laid his face in the crook of his arm.

"I drink too much since we get our ration again."

"It's hardly chronic. Neither is one carnal lapse."

"But it was so sleazy, when you come right down to it."

"Wasn't she a little bit pretty?"

"No. Fifteen years older than me and well corseted."

Frechette chopped a laugh short.

"Oh brother," he said. "Now you're exaggerating the other way."

"Honest, Doc. She's a war widow. Blew her insurance on a shop in Hilo. Kept telling me about the day Pappy's ship went down. The least we could've done was make like a real sultry romance, but all we talked about was McGhee junior and the day Pappy's ship went down."

"Crying on each other's shoulder amidst a world in flames?"

"As trite as that. When I passed out she was still telling me what a sad world it is and how a body needs some sort of comfort."

"So what the hell, Mac."

"So who's comforting my wife?"

"Your child."

"Oh God."

McGhee rolled onto his back and wondered if malarial chills felt anything like his hang-over. He had never been so sick.

"After all, that's worth being happy about," Frechette said.

"It doesn't even seem possible. How can a single cell from yourself produce anything related to you when you aren't even there?"

"The miracle of biology, old boy."

"It's too accidental. Fathers don't have enough to do with it."

"It's the accepted method. It's worked for a number of years."

"But how can fathers take pride in an accidental accomplishment?"

"Wait till you see the kid, Mac."

"When will that be?"

He felt the doctor's slight shrug jerk the cot.

"Your morning-after depression won't last," Frechette said.

"It's not all hang-over. Combat's too effing close again too."

"It does seem to be closing in."

"And this time I know what to expect, Doc. I'm scared."

"That's normal. So am I."

"Did they put out any hot poop at the staff meeting this morning?"

"Maneuvers aboard ship next month."

"Oh great."

"A shakedown cruise for replacements."

"Oh sure."

"It's only to Maui and back."

"If we come back."

"They aren't packing enough gear for a big operation."

"Let's hope not. But I should be with my platoon today."

"You wouldn't have made the first mile."

"I'd have gone down trying. What'll they think now?"

"Anybody can get sick once. Don't be so damned eager."

"But this is like a self-inflicted wound."

"Oh bull feces." Frechette stood up and slapped the centerpole. "Even the colonel brought on an attack of malaria by drinking too much last week. Your system needed flushing, and a little rest won't hurt you. Sergeant Barnard'll hike the platoon as well as you could."

"You're a tough man, Doc."

"Professional callousness. Want another quarter grain of co-deine?"

"Too hard to keep down."

"Some food would be your best bet."

"Maybe I'll try supper."

"Have it your own way. See you later."

McGhee heard the doctor go down the step and walk away whistling. He closed his eyes and sank weakly into a private world of self-made discomfort. But suddenly he rolled to the edge of his cot and began picking up pieces of torn paper from the deck. That address might come in platonically handy some day.

3

After the landing problem on Maui they returned to a monotony of field problems that seemed uninterrupted since Tarawa. Liberty was no relief because Lt. Kocopy's bus tours to Hilo had been discontinued, and small towns were hardly worth going to. You got there and found them overrun with the marines you wanted to get away from. There was nothing to do but have a few drinks and go back to camp. In camp you cleaned gear, did laundry, wrote letters, then it was time for another field problem.

"They can take this goddamned Marine Corps," Private First Class Willy said to Corporal Jones one April afternoon, "and they can shove it to hell and gone up the nearest whatchy."

"Got a belly full?" Salty asked. He looked as though he had been in the field a month, but they had only been out since morning for platoon maneuvers among the rocks and cactus before heading into the hills on an approach march. Platoon Sergeant Barnard was leading them. Lt. McGhee had turned in sick again.

"Couldn't they just let us alone till time to go?" Willy said.

"You wanta get soft?" Salty asked.

"You're damn right. I wanta get so soft they have to scoop me up with a spoon. Slow down!" he yelled up the column.

Salty was the file-closer, and Willy had dropped back beside him. He was an automatic rifleman now, and the BAR was heavy. He shifted it to his other shoulder once more and put his fingers under the straps of his pack in an attempt to ease their cut beneath his arms.

Sgt. Barnard paid no attention to academic matters like the rate of march with full equipment. Men at the end of the column had to run to keep up, but after rejoining the outfit from the hospital and finding his early wound on Tarawa unappreciated he had set out to prove that the Old Marine Corps could still teach volunteer reserves a thing or two. The men resented his effort and made fun of him. He had a huge chest and long legs but a very small rump. The seat of his pants never fit and sagged halfway to his knees. His feet were also small for his size, yet apparently he thought they were big in proportion to his height and wore shoes that flattened out on the end where his toes stopped. The flat ends curled up and made him walk with a teeter like a rocking horse. Bonelli did a crazy imitation of his walk and his way of watching a movie. He appeared to practice posture during movies, sitting with his shoulders squared and his head erect. From time to time he glanced at each shoulder to make sure it had not slipped. You could not see the screen from a comfortable slouch against sandbag seats behind him.

But he was a platoon sergeant, and he had authority.

"Simmer down back there," he bellowed at Willy.

"He's got his," Salty said. "Semper Fi, mate."

"The bastard'll kill us before the Nips get to," Willy said.

"Whatsa matter?" Campbell asked over his shoulder. He was a replacement and a wise guy. "Can't you take it?"

"Go screw yourself, you Selective Service son of a bitch," Private First Class Willy told him. He disliked all replacements, as if their coming in itself brought combat nearer.

When Sgt. Barnard finally called a break, Salty and Willy fell down without taking off their packs. They let the packs brace them in half-sitting positions while they caught up on breathing. Nobody lit a cigarette for several minutes. Salty's lips were caked with dust.

"Keerist," he said at last. "It's all I can do to keep up with a carbine, Andy. How do you manage with a BAR and your short legs?"

"It ain't easy," Willy said. His thigh muscles twitched from long strain. Sweat on his dungarees began to cool, but his heart still pounded. He stared at clouds because he was too pooped to shift his eyes to anything else. The clouds looked bright and effortless. You were quite close to the sky up there and could see the clouds dissipate as they drifted over the ridge dividing the island and caught an updraft.

Salty moved his legs and picked at the worn edge of his shoe sole.

"Another pair of boondockers shot to hell."

"I'd like a nickel for every pair we wear out," Willy said.

"No wonder the war costs so much. Think of the shoe bill."

"They'd save a fortune by leavin' us in camp more often."

"They've got fortunes they haven't even used yet." Salty reached for cigarettes in his breast pocket. "Platoon in defense. Platoon in assault. Attack with flame throwers. Attack with tanks. Attack with skivvy drawers and field scarves. You'd think they'd get tired dreamin' up crap."

"You'd think everybody'd forget the war after a while."

Willy saw Salty's hand come in front of the clouds with a cigarette. He took it in his lips and waited for the match. He smelled fresh smoke from Salty's cigarette, then the match appeared cupped in Salty's hands. Corporal Jones was a real buddy. He was a buddy before he was a corporal and took good care of Willy. It was something that just happened because they got along well together, yet sometimes it bothered Willy. You should not depend on anyone who might get killed. You should not have your emotions involved when casualties started dropping. It would be an added burden when you had enough trouble keeping yourself intact, yet you

could not tell Salty to lay off lighting your cigarettes or going with you on liberty or being around most of the time. It was a bit like having a brother you admired, not a brother who treated you as Ralph or Lloyd had done, because it was more than a matter of liking the guy. Willy liked Leeper and Bonelli, as far as that went. They looked after him too when it came to good chow at the Kamuela Kafe, but with Salty it was different—as if a few hours together in a foxhole on Tarawa had incubated an ineradicable mutual respect in them.

“How’d Leeper get out of this one?” Clay Gosse asked.

“Had a blister on his foot from the one yesterday,” Salty said.

“Bonelli too?”

“Bonelli’s on KP at the officers’ mess.”

“He’s always suckin’ around the officers.”

“His nose’s no browner’n yours,” Willy said.

“You’ll notice I didn’t make a rate,” Gosse told him. Something always rankled Gosse, but never the right thing.

“I noticed,” Willy said. “You didn’t deserve one.”

“Oh wise up,” Gosse said. “Officers don’t know who deserves what. Lt. McGhee didn’t flag his ass up here today to watch us. When they take a notion they draw names out of a hat for rates.”

“McGhee’s sick today,” Salty said.

“I’d like to be sick from stateside liquor.”

“Twice,” Salty said. “He’s missed two hikes.”

“Enlisted men hike with hang-overs.”

“McGhee’s all right,” Willy said. “He’ll be in there when the stuff starts flyin’, Gosse. You’ll probably be in the clap shack again.”

Willy rolled over on his side. He saw the long sweep of the island sloping down to the endless waiting ocean. It looked slick from up there—an easy street to early sorrow; wide and blue and treacherous.

“Where do you think we’ll land this time?” he asked Salty.

“I dunno,” Salty said. “Maybe Guam. Maybe Truk.”

Before Willy could consider Guam and Truk as hateful places like Tarawa, Sgt. Barnard stood up and strapped on his pistol belt.

"All right!" he bellowed. "Man your loads. Let's go."

"Why that lame-brained son of a bitch," Salty said distinctly.

Sgt. Barnard heard the words but could not pinpoint their source.

"Now let's get something straight," he said. He came teetering down the column of men with his chest expanded like a beer barrel. He stopped in front of Willy and rocked back and forth on his curled-up boondockers, hitching at his sagging pants. Willy glared back at him as though he actually had spoken and would stick to his guns. "I'm running this outfit," Sgt. Barnard said. He had a big nose too. You always saw it instead of his eyes, and Bonelli imitated it by sticking his hand out flat in front of his face. "Let's not have any static like a bunch of dogfaces. If you can't keep up on the return march you'll do Extra Police Duty after chow tonight. Is that clear?" The men began to get up in sullen silence. "All right then. Move out!"

They hiked back to camp faster than they had made the approach march, and when they got there they could not take a shower because it was after water hours. They washed in their helmets, then had chow and were issued a can of beer apiece. Afterward Salty and Willy went to the regimental movie, but it rained during the picture and the film broke a couple of times. They huddled together on a soggy sandbag, covered by a poncho, and stuck it out for no reason except that it was supposed to be entertaining to see a movie. It was like that every night, but at least you were tired from the day's exercise and slept soundly.

4

The next day they went on a regimental field problem with fighter planes in close support. Too close. A couple of guys got killed by 50-caliber bullets through the head and chest respectively. Pfc Willy did not hear about this until later, but the detonation of hundred-pound bombs and angry sputter of strafing scraped his nerves raw. He burrowed into lava rock and hated the dry run. Soon it would not be dry.

That night over beef Campbell said to another new man that it

was terrible for a couple of fresh replacements to get killed in a training accident. Pfc Willy told him that in this business you could get killed with equal deadness whether you were fresh or salty as hell. The two replacements shut up and in a few minutes went to the other fellow's tent. Salty and Willy talked about New Zealand and Lt. Coble's accident, then hit the sack early with a feeling of being stretched taut like ready targets.

Then the battalion moved down to the beach near Kawaihae for a week of rubber boat training. While they were gone the quartermaster began to crate heavy gear, and there was no doubt that they would leave Hawaii within a few weeks. Scuttlebutt said they were scheduled for a night landing in rubber boats on one of the Marianas. Nobody liked the thought of a tricky night operation in such flimsy boats.

They spent most of those days in the water and lived in shelter halves set up under a line of trees at the edge of the sand. The cooks used an old pavilion at the end of the beach as a galley, and every evening Bonelli brought beer down from the permanent camp. Lt. McGhee did not let Sgt. Barnard pour it on too hard, so it was an agreeable change if you forgot what was coming.

"It's nice here," Salty said the night before they were to go back to camp. He was bare to the waist and barefooted, as though in a week he had become a lifelong beachcomber. "Seems silly to rush out and get killed when you could just loaf around like these Hawoyans. No strain, Andy. Eat, sleep, and make love. The way life should be."

Willy curled his bare toes through the sand. His dungaree blouse was unbuttoned, and he stared at the water beyond where a light surf broke. Stars were reflected in it, and it appeared to be breathing as it swelled for the break. The sound of waves was restless.

"How much time's left?" he asked.

"Two or three weeks at the most." Salty scooped up a handful of sand and poured it slowly between his spread legs. "Scared?"

"Scared spitless."

"It's the third one for me, Andy."

"I know. I kept hoping the war would get over by now."

"My odds are way down on this one."

"But you'll be rotated after it, Salty." You can say a lot sometimes, but never everything. Chin Up and Be Brave mean nothing when it comes to life or death. You could hope for each other, but it was out of your hands. Heads or tails, that's what it boiled down to.

"I wouldn't especially care," Salty said in a moment, "except I've got so much unfinished business at home. Ruby and the kids ought to be fixed up, and I want to straighten that out. Then of course there's the plain old advantage of being alive. No matter how fouled up it gets, there's a lot to be said for living."

"They hardly gave us a chance to know we were alive here."

"Plenty of loving went begging all right."

"Train, train, train," Willy said.

"Like machines. A few repairs and off we go, Andy."

"You didn't even get to Hilo."

"There's a lot of things I didn't get to do." Salty beat his fist against the sand as though plugging a leak there. "It gets so you forget what it's about. It gets so you don't give a good goddamn for Freedom or Civilization or Remember Pearl Harbor. I hate to be selfish, but it gets to be a kind of personal grudge against Japs or anything else that keeps you out here when you want to be home. Nobody's a machine."

A mild breeze ran along the beach. Among the shelter halves someone began to play a harmonica. Whenever it was quiet and lonely someone seemed to play a harmonica. Water surged and broke and rustled ashore.

"How long can the war last?" Willy asked.

"Forever, I guess. They haven't really started on Germany yet." Salty waved toward rubber boats stacked near the old pavilion. "And if we use that cundrum fleet we won't have the chance of a snowball in hell."

"Who cares?" Willy said. "Besides us?"

The harmonica played thinly from darkness, and stars on the water rose and fell and twisted brightly. Suddenly Salty threw a

handful of sand toward them and leaned forward with his hands on his ankles.

"Let's have a fling, Andy."

"Oh sure. Tomorrow we can go to Honokaa on liberty again."

"Let's spend a week there."

"Sure. Two weeks."

"I mean it, Andy."

"Mean what?"

"Over the hill. AOL. Time of our own."

He leaned back. His pale eyes looked luminous in the faint light.

"MPs would have us an hour after curfew," Willy said.

"Not if we do it right. Those two dames Bonelli showed us—Martha and Watchy. If we take along enough liquor they'll let us stay at their place in the canefields. Think of it. For once we'd be free of reveille and hikes and Sergeant Barnyard."

Martha and Watchy had flat dusky faces and giggled a great deal. They lived outside Honokaa with Martha's mother who was enormously fat and fond of whisky. She welcomed all maureens, as she called them, if they had a bottle, and Bonelli had scouted the situation but decided he preferred Mary at the restaurant. He had taken Salty and Willy out there one afternoon because he had fun drinking with the old lady. She sang island songs and enjoyed herself in the doorway of the house like a captive blimp in a gentle breeze, rocking and swaying but never rising. She understood what maureens wanted of Martha and Watchy, and her loud objections were in no way inhospitable. She merely feared difficulties with the MPs, but a few drinks changed that. It lacked authentic depravity because there was a sort of tropical amorality to the whole generative profusion of bananas and mangoes and sugar cane crowding that loose little household far from the main road. It was outside normal time and convention, but Willy did not adapt to new climates as easily as Salty.

"We'd only get our ass in a sling," he said.

"We might not have one to get in a sling soon," Salty told him.

"But I don't want to be called a deserter."

"We won't desert."

"They'd say we tried to skip out on combat."

"Not if we come back on our own accord."

"But what if something went wrong?"

"We won't miss the boat, Andy. I promise. We only miss some unnecessary crap and prove we're still more than machines."

Willy lay back and looked at the stars, at their amazing indication of billions of light-years. Why worry about the content of a few days? Mangoes and bananas and dusky female bodies in a haze of alcohol . . . All at once an interlude without conscience or strain seemed licit and imperative for men without a future.

"Okay," he said. "Whatever you say, Salty."

Salty bent over and looked closely at him.

"No dice, boy. Not like that."

"I thought you were serious?"

"I am. But you can't go just because I say so."

"I wouldn't have the guts to do it alone."

"But you'll have to pay for it yourself. I can't take the blame for leading you astray when we get back."

"Hell, Salty. I know all about Rocks and Shoals."

Salty grinned. His face grew eager again.

"They'll bust us at least," he said.

"I don't care. Christ. I'm fed up with this routine as much as you are. I'm sick of the whole lousy grind. If we can skip a week of it before we hit the next beach, let's go."

Salty stretched out on the sand with his arms above his head.

"It's a deal," he said. "If we make the gals take a bath every day it won't be too bad. At least they aren't government issue."

5

Leeper and Bonelli promoted whisky for them without quite knowing why, then they took off on liberty and stayed away. Sgt. Barnard discovered their absence at reveille roll call next morning. MPs were notified and searched tentatively for them in the streets

and bars of Honokaa and Kealahou and even Hilo, but they had disappeared.

When Division published orders to start loading cargo aboard ships, the colonel called Lt. McGhee to his office. McGhee had never decided whether the colonel's habit of chewing his back teeth was an unadmitted fear of battle or a great impatience to get out and get at it.

"You've got to find them," the colonel said quietly.

"Yessir. But I hardly know how."

"They couldn't leave the island. They're shackled up somewhere."

"I have a feeling they'll show before we shove off, sir."

"Probably. But Regiment's upset about it. It could be desertion, and if it looks easy there'll be more of it."

"They're damn good men, Colonel. They wouldn't desert."

"We can't be sure of anyone before a push."

"Maybe not."

"Everyone gets jumpy. In any case they've set a bad example."

"Yessir. But there's a lot of shacks on this island."

"I know. Take my jeep and driver and do your best."

"Yessir."

Lt. McGhee spent two days searching. He wore a pistol belt with a holster and pistol and felt foolish on his armed tour, but he found no trace of the missing men. None of their tentmates would give him a clue, and none of the natives admitted seeing two stray marines.

On the afternoon of the second day he scoured Hilo. He really tried, but he had no luck. By evening he knew it was hopeless and suddenly quit fighting himself about the other thing too. He had spotted the house earlier on an aimless drive through the residential district and needed no scrap of paper to identify it. He had the driver take him back there.

"Go have chow," he said as he got out. "Pick me up in an hour."

"Shall I get us rooms at one of the hotels, sir?"

"No. We're going back to camp tonight."

"Aw, Lieutenant. We won't get to Hilo again."

"We can't waste any more time on a wild-goose chase."

"But listen, Lieutenant——"

"Make it two hours, if you've got something on the string."

"Nine o'clock?"

"Okay, nine o'clock. But be sober and be prompt."

"I'll be sober and be pooped—I hope."

The driver gunned the jeep to the corner and turned toward the center of town. Lt. McGhee wondered if neighbors were watching as he walked toward the house. It was tile-roofed and well kept, an imitation of the California-style pseudo-Spanish cottage. Stateside reminders like it and the downtown drugstore always made Hawaii seem stranger than ever for being familiar yet implacably not what you were reminded of.

He knocked at the door. He knew he should have phoned first or stopped at the shop. It was so quiet for a moment that he was certain no one could be home, then he heard her footsteps approaching inside.

"Well what do you know," she said through the screen door.

"Hi, Kit," he said. "Is this awkward for you?"

"Not at all. Come in."

She pushed open the screen, and he saw how badly he had remembered her. She was not fifteen years older than he, at least not obviously, nor ready for corsets in spite of full maturity. She was quite handsome, although her face had a tendency to freckle. She wore a simple cotton dress that was cool and becoming. Her breasts were firm and high. Her hair was short and fine and held to one side by a plain barrette. She appeared poised and equal to the rank of her late husband but as misplaced as her house. She belonged in officers' clubs in San Diego.

"I'm actually on duty," he said as he stepped inside.

"I see the duty belt," she said. "What's the assignment?"

"A couple of boys AOL."

"Are you looking for them here?"

"Hardly," he said. "Not in officers' country."

She looked at him with no smile at all.

"I don't think that's very funny, Mac."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be crude."

"It's a touchy subject under the circumstances."

"I forget how to talk outside of camp."

"Well, sit down. I'll fix you a Tom Collins."

"I shouldn't drink on duty."

"Gin won't smell. I think we'll need a booster."

He took off the duty belt and laid it across a chair. She waited until he was seated on the sofa, then went into the kitchen. He heard her getting ice and wished he had not come here. The room was another stateside imitation, too heavy and too overstuffed for this climate. He had to keep telling himself that he was not in California, and he wondered why she had chosen Hilo instead of Honolulu if she had to live in the islands. You would expect her to pick the most urban spot.

She returned with two tall glasses full of ice and lime and lemon slices and soda bubbles. She smiled when she handed him his drink.

"I am glad to see you," she said. "Why didn't you come before?"

"Busy," he said. "Thanks, Kit."

"The best of luck, Mac."

She touched her glass to his, and they both drank. Then she sat down beside him with her knees drawn up very close to his.

"How soon are you leaving?"

"You're not supposed to know we are."

"It's an awfully small harbor. I'd have to be blind not to see APAs pulling in every day. It's not maneuvers this time."

"It won't be long," he said.

"Damn the war."

"Damn the whole effing world."

"You didn't take much advantage of opportunities here."

"I didn't think it was fair." He drank again, as though it were lemonade. "How did you happen to settle in Hilo, Kit?"

"My aunt lives here. It's her house. I was in Honolulu when Pappy's ship went down, but this seemed wiser. We're both territorial citizens."

She could say that about Pappy's ship without sounding silly.

"Can you explain me to your aunt?" he asked.

"She works on civil defense till midnight tonight."

"My jeep will be back pretty quick."

"I knew you'd be discreet. Have you been to Kona Inn lately?"

"Not since you were there."

"I looked for you a couple of times."

"You really shouldn't have."

"I told myself I wasn't, but of course I was."

"I'm afraid I shouldn't have dropped in today."

"You're like a duck out of water, Mac."

"Why?"

"You're no good at handling an affair."

"That's one course they didn't give us at Quantico."

"Well don't act like I'm a freak or something."

"I'm trying to show some respect for you."

"Is that so hard?" Her voice lost its confidence, although she showed no other signs of coming apart. "I don't pick up every junior officer I meet, Mac. I didn't make an ass of myself the last two times at Kona. I never entertain army officers without my aunt being home. I don't drink alone or go on the town periodically, but I did go to pieces the night I met you because you were so damned decent and so damned proud and so damned lost. That was the first time since Pappy's ship went down, and I don't see why you have to hate yourself for being human too."

"I'm Catholic, Kit," he said.

"Does that make you saintlier than the rest of us?"

"I believe in absolute good and evil."

"Am I absolutely evil then?"

"No, but what we did is."

"All right, call it evil. I'm Baptist. I know about sin. But aren't we supposed to love our neighbors and forgive each other's trespasses? Is an excess of love the worst sin?"

He finished his drink. He did not know what he felt for her. It was more than pity and less than love, yet he had intended to feel nothing except desire. You could confess that and do penance, but

subtler variations were confusing. She was an attractive and intelligent woman. He had come here with one purpose in mind but had forgotten that it was never as simple as wham, bam, thank you, ma'am.

"You shouldn't get emotional about me," he said.

"I can't help it," she said.

"I'll be gone in a few days."

"That's the trouble, Mac. If you were a garrison officer I think I could see you every day without wanting to throw myself at your head. But it's different when you might sail off like Pappy and be gone forever."

He was intensely conscious of being alive; it seemed unalterable.

"They can't sink all of us," he said.

She smiled without easing a frown that pinched her eyes.

"Sorry to sound pessimistic. Let me fill your glass."

"Just a short one," he said. "I've hit it too hard since——"

She stood holding the glass beside him. With that disconsolate frown she looked old, but only as old as a woman who resents suffering. He could not let her grieve for him beforehand. He suddenly reached out and drew her to him roughly, pressing his face against her breast. She dropped the empty glass and dug her fingers into his hair.

6

Then it was over as casually as a quick shower from one of those small clouds drifting in from the sea and dropping a load of moisture without cooling the air. Just before the last liberty truck left Honokaa the following Sunday, Willy and Salty climbed aboard. They returned to the Marine Corps as if they had never been gone.

"Boy, you're in for it now," Gosse said when he saw them.

"Yeah?" Salty said amiably. "T. S."

"We already got orders to shove off."

"Is that a fact?"

"They scoured the island for you. Claim you deserted."

"It's no skin off your testicles," Willy said.

He had an awful headache, but he had a large fuzzy memory of a long tropical *luau* with laughter and giggling and sloth and satiation while the sea beyond the canefields had beat its slow time against the shore. His only regret was that there had not been more of it.

"Man oh man," he said to Salty as the truck started for camp.

"How about that?" Salty said, and they both laughed a little yet.

Some of the men on the truck were noisy drunk, but most of them were tired and disappointed. They knew it was the final liberty on Hawaii. Then two of the drunks sang "Mairzy Doats" over and over, and because it was so childish in the back of a truck already painted with combat markings Willy smiled and bit his lip and wondered if there ever was any point in going to war.

As soon as they got to the battalion area he and Salty surrendered themselves to the Sergeant of the Guard. There could be no charge of desertion that way, but it began to be unpleasant. The Sergeant of the Guard stood them at attention and called the Officer of the Day. He was a replacement lieutenant who apparently thought he had to make an impression. He strode into the tent with his thumbs hooked onto his duty belt and his eyes squinted, then stood motionless in front of the two men as if intending to wilt them by a disapproving stare.

"So," he said finally. "You decided to come back."

"Yessir," Salty said crisply.

"What did you think you were proving?"

Salty ignored that, so Willy cleared his throat and answered.

"Nothing."

"Nothing my ass," the lieutenant said. "Thought you'd beat the system and then got cold feet, didn't you?"

"Nosir," Willy said.

"Don't kid me. Wanted to get locked up, didn't you?"

"Nosir."

"Thought you'd get a soft berth in the brig during combat?"

"Nosir."

"Because you're scared. No guts. A sad pair of marines."

Willy stopped answering him too. He stood with rigid military

indifference as Salty was doing, waiting for the lieutenant to run through his repertory of standard insults. The ones who had not seen combat were always ready to label you a coward—like Lt. Coble in New Zealand. They had no idea to what extent fear was involuntary and legitimate and were afraid of its very existence. This lieutenant also believed men could be openly shamed for an unauthorized absence from duty, but Willy felt no shame at all. There had been no harm in it because he had known from the start that it was not real and would not last.

Eventually the lieutenant quit ranting and seemed to grope for a way to end the interview. The Sergeant of the Guard stepped to the field desk and made an entry in the log. He showed it to the lieutenant, and the lieutenant repeated it lamely.

“Prisoners at large,” he said, “awaiting office hours.”

7

At office hours the next day the colonel awarded them deck courts. There was no time for a more elaborate trial. On the following day Lt. McGhee appeared as their character witness, they pleaded guilty to being absent over official leave, and their own captain reduced them each to the next inferior rank—Salty to private first class, and Willy to private. A few days later they went aboard ship and sailed for Saipan where rank was the least of their worries.

—And the hard contest not for fame, but life.

chapter 7

1

On 15 June 1944 amtracs clawed their way over the reef and into the range of shellfire. Willy's breathing became painfully rapid and shallow, his mouth dry beyond thirst. But it was not like Tarawa in the water. Amtracs got ashore in good order, and not until then did dead and wounded begin to appear where whole and living had been.

Clay Gosse never fired a shot at the Japs he hated. As soon as they hit the beach he got a piece of mortar shrapnel in his thigh muscle and was evacuated in the same amtrac that brought them ashore. Private Willy was glad to see him go yet had little time to think about it.

There was no sea wall on Saipan to collect yourself behind, and you could not see the other side of the island because it was so much bigger than Betio. There were hills in the middle that were called mountains where Japs hid and looked down on everything you did. Again there was the maddening frustration of an unseen enemy, only this time long-range artillery and mortar fire was heavier and more accurate. You could not dig quickly into sand either. You had to chip a hole for yourself out of coral rock. And

you knew the initial shock of shellings and fear and death would not be the whole battle. Prolongation itself became a burden.

In their sector the attack moved inland and northward, savagely. On the second day the young lieutenant who had made Salty and Willy prisoners at large on Hawaii got a steel splinter through his neck. He was in the adjoining platoon when it got pinned down, and he bled to death while they watched for a chance to drag him back to the aid station. He looked very dirty and ineffectual dead.

At night enemy planes sneaked in, and from his foxhole Willy saw an amazing show of antiaircraft fire from ships offshore. The black sky became a screen of lazy red streaks bursting high and hollow, but no planes were hit. And later there were full counter-attacks by Jap ground troops—weird affairs with bugles blowing and flags unfurled and tanks coming on led by Jap officers wearing white gloves and waving swords, like an obsolete movie by a mad impresario. Yet the confusion of the attacks filled you with that helpless terror for the whole scope of deliberate destruction, and you wanted to run but had no place to run to. Afterward Willy wore a pair of those white enemy gloves at night to keep mosquitoes off his hands. During the day he kept them in his gas-mask carrier with other luxuries.

Then Bonelli got killed. One morning they attacked into the foothills, and Bonelli and Leeper led off up a clear slope toward the edge of a clump of trees that they called jungles on Saipan. Salty and Willy started forward behind them, with the rest of the platoon also advancing as a line of skirmishers. There had been only light fire from small arms, then suddenly there was the explosion of an artillery shell. Everyone hit the deck and waited. When smoke and dust cleared away Bonelli was lying close to Leeper with his left arm blown off and part of his face destroyed. It was unbelievably quiet after that single shell burst. In the silence Willy heard Bonelli say "Oh," as if he had just had the wind knocked out of him. Then he seemed to realize that something more serious had happened. He said "Oh" again, as if surprised. And then he died with a long sigh like profound regret.

Leeper screamed.

"Bonelli!"

Willy lay on his belly as if he had lost his own limbs. It was the first time he had ever heard anyone die or anyone scream on the battlefield. Usually there was too much noise. He tried to believe he did not know who had been hit or who had screamed, but it did no good. They were his friends, and Bonelli was one person he had never imagined dead because there was so much lustiness in him and so much disregard for unpleasant aspects of the Marine Corps. You figured he could always avoid bad spots by finding a restaurant to run or beer to distribute, and you did not begrudge him those jobs because he never tried to hurt anyone. His final sigh seemed to accuse whoever had hurt him.

A pair of artillery shells exploded to the right, and before dust and smoke cleared Willy rose and ran to Leeper. Salty got there at the same time, and together they dragged Leeper forward to the cover of trees as though he had called for their help. He was not scratched yet appeared mutilated inwardly. He had depended on Bonelli more than he should have, and from then on he followed the incomprehensible movements of the platoon like a whipped dog without a master.

They all began to look whipped. Agonizing days and nights lengthened into weeks with no end in sight. You never slept enough because you had to stand a turn on watch in your hole at night too, listening to the tubercular cough of mortars in the darkness behind you as they fired a slow traverse-and-search pattern of harassing fire. And every day there were small patrols or full assaults, with someone else getting killed or wounded until you did not know how you could have been missed so long. The vicious *swish-swish* of artillery passing overhead became a thing your ears picked up instinctively and classified as coming or going before you were aware of it. Burned canefields and Jap-infested hills became your total environment. A few Chamorro civilians crept through the lines to surrender, but the real enemy was seldom seen and more seldom captured. At last weariness created a partial insensibility to all suffering, and with this protective numbness you were able to keep going.

For days they held the same positions along the crest of a low ridge and wondered why they were not ordered forward to get it over with. Scuttlebutt said an army division on their right had bogged down in the hills, so they despised the Army for holding them up. It seemed no worse to advance and be shot at than to sit there and be shelled daily with no progress to show for casualties taken. Then they heard that an army general had been relieved by the marine general in top command, and they began to push forward again with a sort of tired consolation. Any move toward an end was welcome.

On the Fourth of July they captured Garapan, which had been a town but was now a sickening travesty of one. It smelled of sour rice and urine and dead flesh. They passed through remnants of concrete and metal and flimsy shacks without any sense of joy in celebrating Independence Day by practical achievement. And on the way to Tanapag Harbor Lt. McGhee flushed three soldiers hidden in a cistern, and maybe he was careless or maybe he had been sampling a bottle of sake, but Willy and Salty helped carry him back to the battalion aid station with his chest bleeding badly from a splatter of grenade fragments.

"Thanks, fellows," he said when they set him down. He had not wanted to be carried, but he could hardly catch his breath. Doc Frechette stepped over to him and pulled aside his bloody dungaree blouse and lifted his dog tags and holy medal. He swabbed away some of the blood and dirt with a piece of gauze, like a busy meat inspector.

"It's superficial, Mac," he said when he was sure. "I'll be with you in a minute. A sniper got Ted in the groin."

"Kocopy?" Lt. McGhee said. Doc Frechette nodded and stepped to another stretcher lying in the shade of a breadfruit tree. Willy glanced at the face of the man on it. He would have thought the man's nose had just been hit, but he remembered that standing upright with his eyes open and more color in his face Lt. Kocopy had still had a disfigured nose. He was apparently unconscious and in shock now, but even though they had cut off his pants Willy could not see his wound.

“We’ll head on back, Lieutenant,” Salty said.

“They’ll need you,” Mr. McGhee said. “Thanks again, men, and good luck. Sergeant Barnyard’ll do all right till I get fixed up.”

The battalion was pinched out of the line there, and they hoped they would go into reserve to escape the strain of facing Japs every hour of the day and night. But a convoy of trucks picked them up and took them around the island to prepare for a new attack. They rode past Aslito Airfield, where seabees and army units already lived in tents, and through captured foothills of Mount Tapotchau to an assembly area inland from Magicienne Bay. Ahead of this area the ferocious cave-hill-bush warfare had left isolated pockets of Japs behind the front lines to be cleaned out later, yet the assault had driven so close to the end of the island that once more you could not understand why resistance continued. You could not respect anyone who fought on and on in senseless suicidal hatred after all resistance became useless.

The next day they marched forward, but it was not an approach march in Sgt. Barnard’s training style. He merely followed the platoon in front of him, and whoever led the battalion knew its condition. The terrain was rugged, and in defiles between coral cliffs every breath of air seemed choked off by a stifling sun and clouds of coral dust. Private Willy plodded along beside Salty like a dumb pack mule, one foot and then the other thudding into deep dust. He itched with heat rash and felt cramps of dysentery. His everlasting fatigue was aggravated by the everlasting pull and cut of his gear—steel helmet, BAR on one shoulder, gas-mask carrier slung across the other, pack on back, clip belt around his waist with the additional weight of his poncho and canteens. Flies swooped into the sweat of his face and clung there. His pulse pounded at every pressure point in his body. He breathed dust through his mouth, but if he breathed through his nose he nearly gagged on the related stench of burned sugar cane and rotting corpses. Jap corpses lay everywhere; swollen, red, and reeking. Sometimes a burned-out Jap tank stood rusting beside the road as if it had never been mobile.

Sound barely existed. Once in a while a muffled vibration of ar-

tillery struck your eardrums, but you knew it was friendly because the Japs had not used big stuff for a long time. Overhead friendly planes circled on station waiting to strike, but their sound was lost in layers of heat between them and the ground. Even moving troops seemed to make no noise, and you had to be leery of silence since you had been conditioned to having it explode. Each blasted cave, each clump of trees, each foot of possible cover, might hide a few fanatic Nips with malicious weapons. Existence was agony, but you did not want it to end quite yet.

Private Willy kept glancing over his shoulder to see if Leeper was still there. It was a habit, a last shred of compassion. Leeper was another irritation, but he was someone you had started with and could not turn loose of altogether. Most men in combat shuck off the poses of civilization, but Leeper had disintegrated. He had watched his two best friends die in combat, Chick Woodruff on Tarawa and Bonelli here. It had taken the heart out of him. He was only a bare nub of incompetence and fear now. Doc Frechette had suggested evacuating him, but Leeper claimed he was all right. He had to get even with the Japs, he said. It was an expression he had learned in boot camp, but when it actually came to getting even he just cowered in his foxhole and shook.

"Why don't you hop on a jeep?" Willy asked him when they stopped for a moment to let several loads of supplies pull past. The sound of motors so close seemed brutal. Dust welled up behind the vehicles as though burned from the road by a dry chemical reaction.

"I'm all right," Leeper said again. His shoulders heaved with breathing. His head was drawn back as if pulled from behind, and he did not let Willy see his eyes. "Thanks, anyway, Andy."

They moved on and began to climb into the central hills. It was getting late but no cooler. Private Willy looked ahead and tried to guess where they would stop for the night, sure that if it were a hundred yards farther he could not make it. His legs ached, his back ached, his individual cells ached separately and collectively. When he tried to swallow, his throat adhered to itself. The sustained effort of placing one foot before the other had long since

gone beyond plausible limits of exertion, yet he plodded on and on behind the man in front of him until the sun had almost set and it seemed as though the front of the column must have passed over the summit of the hills into some kind of silent enemy trap gradually swallowing up the whole exhausted battalion.

Then they came to a supply dump where jeeps were parked and a command post where radios were set up. Without audible orders all units moved off the road into tentative positions for perimeter defense. The men dropped to the ground as soon as Sgt. Barnard signaled a stop. He took off his pack and went to the company commander for orders about digging in. It seemed impossible to drag forth one more effort, yet digging in had become as essential to life as eating. You made a hole for yourself after all other energy had been expended.

Salty took a drink from his canteen. He squished a mouthful of water through his teeth, puffing out one cheek and then the other, letting a little moisture run onto his lips. He wiped at the mud of sweat and dust on his eyelids, then got out two cigarettes from a K-ration package. He stuck one cigarette in the corner of Willy's mouth. He lit his own, then Willy's, then lay flat on his back. The fighting was just over the crest of this ridge, but they could hear none of it.

"Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus," Salty said.

With his eyes closed and his face coated with dust he looked dead. If he were killed he would look like that, and it would probably be no harder to bear than seeing him now. Willy felt waves of weariness weaken his last hold on consciousness, but he had to stay awake until his hole was dug. Maybe at least he would not have the first watch tonight. Maybe for once they were far enough behind the front lines not to need a watch.

"I'm so beat," Willy said, "I'd cry if a Nip looked at me."

"Remember the joke about what a man first does when he gets home?"

"Yeah."

"It's false. I'd take off my pack and sleep a day first."

"Before you ate?"

"Before anything." They both talked to keep themselves awake. "If we attack tomorrow, leave me here for the birds."

"Do you think we will attack?"

"Bound to. Heard the runner say a big banzai broke through the Army last night, clear back to the marine artillery. That's why we moved up."

Willy swore. He did not listen to such scuttlebutt except from Salty, but Salty usually had the straight scoop.

"No wonder their general got relieved," Willy said. "The whole friggin' Army should've stayed stateside."

"Did you see their tents at the airfield?"

"I even smelled fresh bread bakin'."

"Fresh bread," Salty said. "Imagine."

"Remember how bakeries smelled back in the states?"

"Imagine a slice of fresh bread right now."

"The heel especially. With lots of butter."

"Even without butter. On the 'Canal we didn't even have K——"

Suddenly there was a single rifle shot. They were at the edge of what had been a garden before the landing. Above them the slope was bare and rocky, but to the right was a clump of trees, a patch of the jungle that grew wherever canefields and cliffs allowed it. Salty and Willy automatically rolled onto their bellies, their weapons in hand and ready to be fired before they finished flattening out. You had to have some reserve of alertness no matter how groggy you got, and immediately they sized up the situation for what it was.

They saw four bandy-legged Nips running downhill from the small clump of trees toward a larger one. A patrol had flushed them out, and men of the patrol were kneeling to aim carbines and rifles. Salty and Willy fired in unison with nearly every other man in the company. The four Nips faltered and crumpled into the grass. Half of the patrol moved forward to check them for signs of life, and the other half moved in among the trees. More patrols were working through critical areas in the larger piece of jungle, but the skirmish was over.

Salty rolled onto his back again, the stub of his cigarette still between his lips. He spit it out and lit another.

"Those sneaky little yellow bastards," he said. "They never know enough to quit, Andy. It gets damned tiresome."

Private Willy was watching Leeper. He lay a few yards downhill from them, his face against the ground while he chipped blindly at rocks ahead of him with his entrenching tool.

"Look," Willy said. Salty turned his head sideways and looked.

"Oh Jesus," he said. "We can't be special nursemaids too, Andy."

"Why don't they evacuate the poor son of a bitch?"

Salty held his hand in front of Willy. The cigarette seemed appallingly white between his dirty fingers. It trembled as his whole hand did, slightly but appreciably.

"Why don't they evacuate all of us?" he said. "How much longer can any of us keep going at this rate? Nobody lasts forever."

2

At dawn the next morning they climbed over the ridge to take new positions in the line and attack down to the western beaches. It was a long sweep through fairly open fields, but there were not many casualties. Occasionally a rattle of small arms, a badly aimed knee mortar, or a hastily lobbed grenade came at them, but it was not bad. The Japs seemed to be running, although you did not know where they would go.

On your right, to the north, you could see Marpi Point at the end of the island. There was action all the way to it, because you could see shell bursts and flame-thrower smoke and hear concussion when your own sector was quiet. The rest of the island was more or less secure, yet retreating Japs would not admit that they were outnumbered and defeated. Honorable surrender appeared to be an intolerable concept.

In the afternoon it became another slaughter like the end of Tarawa. Marines reached cliffs that dropped straight to the western water. With no land left to defend except caves and recesses in the

cliffs Japs holed up by the hundreds, surrounded and beaten but refusing to give up. The ones with weapons fought furiously like cornered animals, in spite of women and children trapped among them. You did not want to kill them yet could not reason with them or leave them there because they insisted on trying to kill you. Amtracs patrolled the water with loud-speakers, interpreters begged for surrender, but there were no signs of white flags.

Private Willy fired burst after burst from his BAR into ravines and cave openings. He ducked at answering fire, moved on call to new positions, and covered demolition teams climbing down with satchel charges and flame throwers to clean out the worst resistance. He loathed the repudiation of common sense that required a methodical extermination of human beings. He saw a baby hurled into the water toward the amtracs, and he fired one complete clip of ammunition at the ledge where he had seen a soldier or woman stand to throw the baby. Maybe the child had been dead already, but that kind of frenzy jolted him.

And then it was evening again. The sun hung low over the western Pacific, ready to slide out of sight before you could finish off this pocket of fanatics. Orders came down from higher echelons to withdraw for the night into defense positions, and firing died out as, one by one, squads dogged for the rear to dig in.

"Keep 'em covered," Sgt. Barnard told Willy. "Jones here will give you the word when we're in position back there."

And suddenly he was alone at the edge of the cliffs in stillness. Now the Japs could rush up and and overrun him while the rest of the battalion was disorganized in the distance. He was too worn out to do much, and one man could do little anyway. The sun went down, and then it took extreme concentration of will to lie there watching for a counterattack to begin. He could neither see nor hear troops behind him and wondered if they had forgotten him or he had missed the signal to pull back. He hated being alone in darkening hostile territory.

At last he heard Salty call his name softly. He was up and running in a sort of exhausted panic before he saw where Salty had crouched, as if Japs were certain to fire at his first sign of motion.

But it was totally quiet up and down the line when Salty rose just ahead of him and led the way at an easy dogtrot across an open field. Panic died as he saw reassuring figures of marines along a new line, Saipan-colored men tiredly digging foxholes.

Platoon Sergeant Barnard was sitting at the head of a slight draw leading down to a break in the cliffs. He had laid out positions to the right of an unburned canefield and well forward of it.

"Good boy, Willy," he said. He sounded apologetic for what he had asked of him and for what was still ahead. "There's no time to set up bobwire, but from here you can hold 'em till hell freezes over. They'll try to bust out of there tonight, so keep your eyes open and hit 'em hard."

Willy nodded and started stripping off his gear to get his entrenching tool. It was not a good spot, but he knew Sgt. Barnard had picked the best he could. There were not enough men left to double up in foxholes, and along here big boulders forced the line to bend. Salty would be on the other side of a boulder to his left, and Leeper was already digging in to the right with another platoon tied in beyond him.

Sgt. Barnard went away down the line. His pants drooped behind and he walked like a rocking horse, but you could not laugh at him now. He had been given too much responsibility and seemed sorry to be no better than he was.

Salty went after supplies as Willy began digging. He kept a close watch to the front, resting frequently, pouring sweat. Leeper had already finished his hole and disappeared into it. By the time Willy had scooped out enough dirt and coral to let him lie beneath the surface of the ground it was almost dark. Salty came dragging back from the supply dump, and Willy had never seen him look so bushed. He brought grenades and fresh clips of ammo and cans of C ration. He took two cans over to Leeper who thanked him but did not sit up to eat. Willy helped Salty finish scooping out his hole on the other side of the boulder, then they sat down together on the edge of it and ate their supper.

It did not take long. You had to eat fast to keep flies from swarming over your food, and there was not much of it anyway.

You were never starved, but you were never full either. Salty mixed lemon powder with water in his canteen cup, and they both drank from it. Nothing ever satisfied your thirst completely, but lemonade helped. They buried the tin cans, then Willy took mosquito repellent from his jungle kit and handed it to Salty. Salty rubbed it over the grime on his hands and face and gave it back to Willy who anointed himself. Willy thought it might be easier to stay awake now for a couple of hours than to wake up later, so he volunteered to take the first watch. Salty agreed. It was too dark to smoke a cigarette, so Willy went to his own hole to start the night.

It was sticky hot. Nocturnal mosquitoes were taking over nuisance duty as diurnal flies left off. Instead of shedding clothes and stretching out for coolness Willy had to add more clothing. From his gas-mask carrier he took leggings and wrapped them around the bottoms of his dungarees, lacing them tight to keep his ankles free of mosquitoes. From his helmet inner-liner he took a black head-net, put his helmet back on, pulled the net down over it and tucked the ends inside his dungaree blouse. Then he put on the white Jap gloves that were no longer white and lay down in his hole where no trace of cooling breeze could reach him. He lay on his stomach with his head raised enough to let him look along the barrel of his BAR on its bipod, guarding the dark draw that made a fine exit for Japs in the cliffs.

He itched anyway wherever the cloth of his dungarees drew tight across his skin and mosquitoes found a target. He wanted to scratch, but it took too much effort. Besides, unnecessary movement might give his position away. At night anything could happen, although maybe this time nothing would. Japs were utterly unpredictable, and you always hoped they would miss another chance.

With a high hollow plop at irregular intervals, illuminating shells began to break above the cliffs. Ships were zeroing in. Cold blue lights lit the night crazily as they drifted downward and out, but they were comforting. You knew ships out there somewhere were giving you a hand. He remembered how it felt to be aboard a blacked-out ship. Steel decks were still warm at night, and men

on watch were boldly upright instead of cowering in holes. The only sounds were a hum of blowers and faint hiss of water slipping by. If you looked into bow waves you saw brief flashes of dead-green phosphorescence.

He heard a jeep motor chugging in the distance behind him and was glad Bn-4 was also on the job. It was always nice to know that someone besides you had a stake in this business. Facing the enemy in darkness tends to make you think you alone are awake and open to danger. Little night sounds and imagined sounds grow bigger and bigger. Mosquitoes zooming past your ears sound like ricochets. Stray breezes in the grass sound like crawling hordes. You stare at suspected movement until your eyes water, and even the outline of solid land seems to start writhing.

He watched and sweated and waited, counting the minutes between illuminating shells after their pattern became regular. Ships were throwing them over at fifteen-minute intervals. When a cloud drifted near one the revolving shadow of its parachute was cast upward in a clumsy intrusion on the domain of the weather. But with only four shells an hour breaking, the old man must not be too worried—if the old man was doing anything besides pounding his ear. After eight shells it would be time to wake Salty and change watch.

In the first of each light Willy searched the area closest to him. More than anything else he feared being knifed or bayoneted from above and behind by an infiltrating Jap. It was his special terror, just as Salty feared planes in the sky more than Nips in his foxhole. Salty hated all planes, because one afternoon a TBF had crashed near his foxhole, showering him with burning gasoline and debris. He said nothing in the world gave you a more helpless feeling than to look up and see tons of disabled machinery falling straight at you from the sky. He got nervous whenever friendly planes worked in close support.

Willy wished he could smoke a cigarette, but it was a long time until morning when he would have the next one. He took a cautious drink from his canteen instead, hating the painty taste and tepidness of it. What a miserable way to live—stuck in a hot hole

with a few drops of water, afraid of your own muscle squeaks. Would you ever again be able to get up and walk like a man? He longed to turn over on his back and go to sleep, but the safety of Salty and Leeper might depend on his wakefulness. He could hardly keep track of illuminating shells though. Had there been three or four since he started counting?

He had a tendency to drowse and let his face fall forward into the dirt. He tried to think of pleasant things to keep his exhausted mind functioning, yet pleasant things had become impossibly remote. Judy? What did she look like? What link was there between her and this Fleet Marine Force in the Field? Judy had become an abstraction like Peace or Happiness—unrelated to sweating your heart out, shitting your guts out, fighting off flies and mosquitoes, fighting off Nips, fighting off sleep, and hoping not to be killed during your next breath.

He could only think clearly of his present life, since the landing down by Charan Kanoa weeks ago and a slow drive north toward Marpi Point. He could remember every detail of Bonelli's death, but not how it felt to kiss Judy. He could remember the sight of Lt. McGhee's bloody chest, but not the cool pines of Lake Pend Oreille. He seemed to remember every moment of the daylong grind and nightlong anxiety on this island, every tasteless bite of C or K or D ration, every mouthful of dirty water, every hateful hour of eternal sweat and eternal tiredness, but not a blessed thing about Spokane, Washington.

Days sweating and nights sweating, for how long yet? How rotten and durable were these Japs? They couldn't win but wouldn't give up, forcing you to go on living in filth and holes. They crawled into caves and refused to come out until blown out piecemeal. They killed and enforced killing until you were beaten senseless by sheer strain and could not even remember the face of the girl you loved.

All at once he jerked rigid with his eyes wide. It had started. To his right he saw flashes of firing and heard the steady *plug-plug-plug* of a machine gun. They were trying to break through, and he peered down his draw for approaching shadows. Familiar fear

tingled inside him, but he could not see anything. He heard the sharper fire of Jap guns answering marine guns to his right, then began to hear the peculiar whang of detonating grenades. Marine grenades. No—Jap. No—both. A 60-mm. mortar illuminating shell broke above the line from the rear, and he saw definite figures in the draw below. He gave them a burst from his BAR, saw them lie still, gave them another burst to make sure. When the illuminating shell burned out he was conscious of the whole line firing.

His pulse pounded with resentment. They were cheating him of his turn to sleep. He heard Salty firing on his left, heard Leeper fire once, heard the well-known ping of answering bullets going overhead. Everywhere now there was a steady thug of machine guns, metallic whang of grenades, and irregular crack of rifle fire. He looked for Nip gun flashes, saw dark silhouettes moving up over the edge of the cliffs, and fired two clips at them. Ricochets bounced off the boulder beside him, then he realized that this might mean more than a loss of sleep. The attack was extensive. Japs might break through and start bayoneting and knifing from behind. They might accomplish a great deal.

Salty lobbed an incendiary grenade far out in front, and by its glare Willy saw that at least no Nips had sneaked within hand-grenade distance yet. Good old Salty. He always knew what to do.

After the grenade burned out Willy reloaded his weapon and felt over his spare ammunition. It hardly seemed enough, but maybe the sonsabitches would give up after one desperate try. Machine guns were throwing out a lot of lead, covering the front thoroughly. You could see streaking red tracers everywhere, but streaking pink tracers of Jap fire weren't doing badly either. Willy did not want to waste ammunition, yet the machine guns could not reach down his draw. He gave it a burst every now and then and waited for illuminating shells.

As near as he could tell ships were throwing in a shell every five minutes now. By their blue-white glare he could see bodies at the end of his draw. At least he thought they were bodies. In darkness between lights they appeared to be crawling toward him. He had to spray them again, and the rest of his company, the

whole battalion, kept firing too. On both sides the *thug-thug-thug* of machine guns went on and on until another second of it seemed bound to snap his nerves. He flinched at every hand-grenade explosion nearby. He froze and stared as each illuminating shell broke above him. He heard Leeper firing nervously into darkness on his right and hoped Leeper would be able to hang on somehow until the attack petered out. There were no tanks or artillery to contend with anyway. It was something to be thankful for.

But the Japs were persistent. The tedious din of firing continued long after it became impossible to stand it, and then Willy knew he was going to run out of ammunition. Maybe the entire line would run out. All those guns used an awful lot of lead, and he hoped Bn-4 had been prepared for a real emergency. He began to fire only on extreme compulsion, but even so he fired often. His supply of full clips got lower and lower, and he remembered the banzai attack on the Army and began to understand how they could be overrun.

It must have been after midnight when a lull came. Not all the line fired at once any more. Only isolated groups blazed away from time to time. Then Willy called Salty's name. In a moment Salty crawled around the boulder to his hole and wedged in beside him.

"What's the trouble?" he whispered.

"I only got a clip and a half left," Willy told him.

"Oh brother." Salty squirmed around in the dark and handed him two fragmentation grenades and one incendiary. "They're not gonna quit now. I hope I can find that dump again."

Willy hated to be left alone, but there was no alternative.

"Don't get lost," he said.

"Put a lamp in the window, just in case."

Salty squeezed Willy's arm and crawled off into the night.

It was awfully quiet then. Far to the right, almost to Marpi Point, firing continued, but the rest was silence. Willy began a fight to keep his eyes open. They were gritty and gummy. He rubbed them with his gloved hand again and again, but between lights he could hardly see the outline of cliffs against the water, let alone suspicious

bumps that might be crawling men. Maybe it was over now. Maybe the Japs recognized defeat and would stay in their caves until morning. But you could not trust them. With Salty gone you had to stay awake more than ever, yet what if another attack did start and you fired your last bullet and threw your last grenade? What if Salty really got lost, or was hit?

You were supposed to pray at such times, but he could not believe that any Creator wanted to hear such trivial prayers. God help *me*; Jesus save *me*; Mother of God pray for *me*. (Why should the Cause of Causes have become a whole cozy family—Father, Mother, Son, and Holy Ghost? He had argued with Bonelli about it, and Bonelli said you had to have faith. He had kept praying and admitting he was a sinner, but it had not helped him. Unless death was a help—yet even Christians preferred not to die and reap their Reward in Heaven.) Favoritism was impossible. Why should God deflect a bullet from Johnny Jones because Johnny Jones prayed harder than Jack Smith? How could anyone expect special treatment in a universe so precisely arranged after all? The whole pattern was much more remarkable than a kindergarten system of personal favors and punishments. He could not pray.

Minutes dragged by like crippled snails. He throbbed with fatigue. Each pump of blood from his heart caused a shrill protest in every part of his overworked body. His eyes smarted and drooped shut. It was too quiet now, yet if he could hold his eyes open maybe he could hold off the Japs until Salty returned to take up the burden of watching and waiting.

Another illuminating shell plopped alight overhead. He saw no figures creeping toward him. Nothing new. The light floated down into water, and he had to talk to someone.

"Leeper," he called softly. "How you doin'?"

"Keep quiet," Leeper said hoarsely, as though a whisper would give away their position and bring on a fresh charge by the Japs.

So Willy waited, exhausted, aching, blinking, sweating. The next illuminating shell startled him awake. Still he did not see anything coming up the draw, but now he was worried about Salty. It had been more than fifteen minutes since he had gone. Something

could have happened to him—a stab in the dark, a knife, a bayonet . . .

He heard someone behind him and knew it was not Salty or the direction Salty would come from. He spun around with his BAR.

“Who’s there?” he said.

“Dagwood.” He was not sure he recognized the voice.

“Countersign,” he said.

“Blondie.”

It was Platoon Sergeant Barnard. He crawled up to the foxhole and lay with his arm across Willy’s shoulders, panting.

“How you doin’, boy?” the sergeant asked.

“Okay, I guess. Any of ’em break through?”

“Not yet. How’s your ammo?”

“Nearly gone. Salty went for more.”

“Got any extra frag grenades? Most of the boys are out.”

“Only two.”

“Better give me one. Jones should get more at the dump.”

Willy gave him a grenade, then the sergeant crawled over to see Leeper. You would not have expected old Barnyard to be out crawling along the line at night. Some trigger-happy bastard like Leeper could plug him accidentally if the Japs didn’t. But it was nice to know the platoon was still tied together. It was nice to know you were still part of a unit and not just an isolated scrap of misery in a small hole.

Then Willy saw them coming again. After Sgt. Barnard had gone and the next illuminating shell had drifted away, he saw half-erect figures moving up the draw. There was no mistake about it. The dirty dogged little devils were attacking again, coming straight toward him. He fired desperately until his BAR went dead. The half clip already in it had been used up. In the silence he heard one wild eerie cry.

“Banzai!”

Then the entire line was firing once more. His hand shook as he slipped the last full clip into his weapon and wondered where the hell Jones was. He fired quickly into moving shadows, saw them break, and that was the end of his ammunition. He had no

more bullets at all, nothing but two grenades—one of them good only for light.

He grabbed his fragmentation grenade. At least two figures still crawled toward him. He fumbled the pin from the grenade, raised up and threw it with all his might. He heard the spoon spin off before he was lying down again. The grenade burst well forward, and almost simultaneously he heard a Nip grenade bounce off a rock near him. He burrowed down and was shaken by the explosion. Before he lifted his head there was another explosion. It seemed to be in Leeper's hole.

Then he expected a final grenade or bayonet in his back or rifle butt in his face, yet he did have one last weapon. He took his combat knife from its sheath and crouched low for a last stand. He looked ahead and to both sides but saw nothing. Nothing for sure. He switched the knife to his left hand and reached for the incendiary grenade.

He threw the grenade toward shadows that worried him most. When it began to burn, a Nip groaned. Willy saw him clearly, lying on his side with burning phosphorous almost against his belly, too wounded to move. Beyond him lay two other Nips, but they were not moving either. He hoped they were dead from his first grenade. He didn't want to fight them with a knife. He didn't want to get up and run for the rear. He wanted Salty to come back and everything to be all right, yet now he was aware of a painful whimpering close by.

It was not a Nip whimpering. It came from Leeper's hole.

The grenade burned out, and Willy waited for his eyes to adjust to darkness again. He kept the knife ready in his right hand as a token defense and listened to heavy firing up and down the line while the nerve-wracking whimper from Leeper's direction continued. The poor devil must have been hit by one of the grenades and might be bleeding to death. You could probably do nothing about it, but you might use his rifle if he had any ammunition left.

As soon as Willy was certain that shadows in the draw remained stationary, he crawled toward Leeper.

"What's the matter?" he asked at the edge of the foxhole.

Leeper lay on his back with his hands over his eyes, sobbing steadily like a punished child. Willy shook his elbow. Leeper was unaware of him.

"Are you hurt, Bony?" Willy said. He had never heard a grown man cry like that. It seemed less from pain than from inner collapse, but he took off one glove and felt along Leeper's throat and cheeks for blood. In the dark he could not tell whether he felt sweat or blood or tears.

"Cut it out," he said, exasperated and angry at his own helplessness and those wracking sobs. He shook Leeper with both hands, but Leeper was rigid and unaware of anything external.

What could you do? If you tried to drag him to the aid station there would be a thirty-yard gap in the line. Japs would not be long in discovering it. Bony was a friend, but you could not jeopardize the whole line by trying to reach the aid station with him.

Willy found Leeper's rifle at the front of his hole. He also found two full eight-round clips in Leeper's cartridge belt. They would last a while anyway. Maybe as long as Willy would last.

He started crawling back to his own hole with the rifle and cartridges. Someone spoke. He stopped, pressed flat and tense.

"What?" he said. It had sounded like a warning.

"Jiggs," the voice repeated. Then he remembered the passwords.

"Maggie," he said and in a passion of relief realized that it was Salty—old reliable Salty. He was lying in Willy's hole loading the BAR. Willy crawled in beside him, panting, almost sobbing himself.

"Christ," he said. "Christ, Salty, I thought you'd got it."

"Easy, boy," Salty said, his voice tired. "What's with Leeper?"

"Cracked up, I guess."

"Couldn't you get him to shut up?"

"He's had it. I think a grenade went off in his face."

"Oh god. Well, let's hope they send a corpsman for him."

They had to load empty clips by hand, because Salty had only been able to get loose rounds. He had had to scrounge for those, but he had brought enough to last till morning—if morning was not too impossibly far away. He had been unable to dig up any

more grenades, yet with plenty of cartridges they could probably hold out.

Before Salty went back to his own foxhole a couple of corporals came and took Leeper away. The cessation of sobs was hardly noticeable in the insane chatter of machine guns drawing your patience out to where it must have snapped seconds ago but never had. After Salty left, Willy gripped his BAR as if it were holding him afloat, then fired with extreme precision when he had to, as if he had been goaded beyond human sensibility into a realm of limpid fury which gave him precise control over this one act. Minute by minute machine guns chattered on and on and on. One stopped and two more picked up the rhythm, one slightly faster than the other in devastating syncopation until a third began. The two stopped, the original one began again, then they all took turns. On and on and on, chipping away at your sanity second by second.

The attack in their sector was not renewed in force, but time after time a few Japs tried to sneak up from the cliffs. When it did grow quiet nearby, shadows in the draw appeared to come alive and once more you had to fire at them. Then Willy thought he heard someone run past Leeper's empty hole. He whirled around but could see nothing. He lay down again and rested his forehead on his doubled fist. His eyes burned as they closed and seemed to cause a ringing in the front of his head. He wondered how the machine guns kept from overheating, where they got so much ammunition, how many barrels they had burned out during the night. He wondered how tired you could get, how much worse you could feel before you too started sobbing like Leeper. He did not know what he was wondering when all at once it was completely silent along the line.

With enormous effort he raised his head to look for shadows. He saw the distinct outline of grass blades, taro leaves, rocks, and motionless bodies. Further out he saw the clear shape of cliffs against dark gray water, and a great weight seemed to lift from him.

Dawn was coming--the full illumination of daylight.

"Salty," he called.

"Yeah, Andy."

"It's my turn to crap out."

"Okay. Sleep fast."

Private Willy rolled onto his back. For twenty-four hours he had been without sleep. For almost a month he had been without enough sleep. He was beat. His mouth slacked open, his breath came in quick shallow pants, and he fought to relax as he had just finished fighting to stay awake. He had to sleep a little before they moved out again.

But when his mind had started to let go, when he was sinking at last into unconsciousness, it began to rain. An abrupt shower dropped without warning from one of those small tropical clouds that never look like rain. He fumbled for his poncho but was soaked before he got it over him and pulled the BAR up between his legs to keep it dry. Then there was mud where he put his head down again, and he had to shift his position to get a piece of poncho under his cheek. But he was lying on a pile of brass which had fallen into his hole during the night, and he became aware of sharp edges punching his hips and shoulders. He tried to push the brass aside, got his poncho all disarranged, and felt a frustrated fury defeat his sleepiness.

He lay with his eyes squeezed shut, a bundle of protesting organs, an exhausted nervousness, a piece of infinite weariness and prolonged abuse. He had a foul mouth, a dull headache, an aching gut. When the rain stopped in a few minutes, his foxhole was slimy with mud.

He was nearly asleep anyway when Salty yelled.

"Hey! Look at that!"

Willy threw off his poncho, rolled over, and raised up. His eyes went automatically to his own front. He saw lifeless bodies scattered down his draw to the cliffs, ten or fifteen of them. Two bodies were within twenty yards of him.

But what Salty had seen was a column of live Japs marching up from the beach in front of the next company. There were women and children and men, some with weapons on their shoulders, some with bundles, some with babies. There were about fifty of them walking quickly in twos, an organized march from the beach to a field of unburned sugar cane behind the lines. Scattered shots sounded in the next company, and Willy reached for his BAR. Then someone yelled to hold fire.

Platoon Sergeant Barnard came running along the line. He stopped beside Salty and crouched to watch the extraordinary parade of Japs.

"Must be prisoners," he said, even though they saw no marine guards. "Must be headed for the battalion CP."

There was no other plausible reason for a column of Japs to make an orderly march through a line of marines. Even when another scattered burst of firing broke out the column marched steadily on until the end of it disappeared into the canefield.

Willy had almost gone to sleep on his face before a heavy fire fight broke loose in the rear. He saw Sgt. Barnard and Salty flatten out as bullets whipped overhead from somewhere behind the lines.

"Goddamn," Sgt. Barnard said. "That's right in battalion CP."

He began crawling furiously toward the company command post to check the situation, and Willy felt a kind of prostrate amusement at the reversal of battle from a platoon level to battalion headquarters. In a little while firing at the CP died out, then Sgt. Barnard passed the word to keep a close watch to the rear because the Japs actually had escaped through a gap in the lines. What they had failed to accomplish by force last night they had accomplished by a daring maneuver that tired marines had not believed even as they watched it. Protected by women and children the Japs simply walked out of their trap on the beach and headed for the hills, undeterred by the battle at the CP.

A patrol from the next company worked through the canefields without finding any fugitives, then a scout-sniper platoon moved forward to check the cliffs. They drew no fire, and when they had

settled into advance positions Salty walked around the boulder to Willy's hole.

"Christ," he said. "What a night."

He sat down and laid out their breakfast—two cans of dry C ration, two cans of wet. The sun was up, its heat as chronic as though no rain had ever fallen. Flies swarmed over everything again, and no matter how you had spent the night you had to get ready for the day.

Willy stood up and stretched stiffly, then sat down on the edge of his hole. He took off the white gloves and put them in his hip pocket. He unlaced his leggings and packed them into his gas-mask carrier. He pulled off his mosquito head-net and folded it into a neat square, then took off his helmet and put the net inside the inner liner. For a while he scratched his head to air his hair, then took the inner liner out of the steel helmet, peeled back the camouflage cover, held the helmet between his knees, and poured a cup of water into the bottom of it.

"Did you shower this morning?" he asked Salty.

"I used Mum," Salty said.

Willy dug through his gas-mask carrier for a torn square of dirty towel. He dampened it and swabbed his face and ears and neck until the water was gone. He squeezed out the towel, put it back in the carrier, turned his helmet upside down, and put the camouflage cover back over it. He tucked the edges under and slipped the inner liner in. Then he got his toothbrush from the gas-mask carrier, wet it under a dribble of water from his canteen, and slowly brushed his teeth. When he had finished his ritual of keeping clean he took the spoon from his canteen carrier and picked up his can of meat and beans.

Flies swooped at the spoon between the can and his mouth. He waved them off, but it hardly discouraged them. Salty had mixed coffee powder with water in his canteen cup, and they both drank from it to ease their thirst. When they glanced along the line they saw other men in the same predicament—filthy, tired, and listless beside their holes, eating and sweating and swatting at flies.

"Poor Leeper," Willy said as he remembered last night.

"Poor, hell," Salty said. He sat half asleep against the boulder, his empty can on his knee, his bearded face shadowed by his helmet. "He's out of it, but we'll fight Japs in these hills till the cows come home. I'm sick of it, Andy. Then after Saipan there's Tinian and Guam and half the Pacific. Sometimes I wonder who gets the dirtiest end of the stick—the dead or the living."

4

They spent the day mopping up along the cliffs, because not all Japs had escaped or been killed. Some of them were captured alive at last, mostly women and children but even a few soldiers.

Late in the afternoon Salty and Willy lay above the beach with their weapons trained on the mouth of a cave where several hold-outs still hid. A company runner came from behind them to ask where the platoon leader was. While Willy was telling him which way Sgt. Barnard had last gone down to the beach, another group of prisoners climbed up from there. They were led by a very old woman in rags, scrawny, and swarming with flies. Behind her were younger women with sleeping babies strapped to their backs, the babies' heads rocking back and forth as the women moved. Behind them came very young children, and all these prisoners seemed dazed at having fallen into the hands of the enemy. The enemy in this case was Sgt. Barnard and his runner, both looking worn out as they climbed into view.

"That's him," Willy told the company runner.

The runner waited for Sgt. Barnard to reach him. The prisoners halted and squatted when they had passed Salty and Willy, not because anyone told them to but because they had to rest after their short climb.

"The captain says bring your platoon to the fork in the road south of the battalion CP," the company runner said when Sgt. Barnard stopped beside him. "We're pullin' back to a rest area, he says."

Sgt. Barnard looked as if he were unable to understand the

message. He rubbed his eyes and held his carbine slackly in his right hand.

"What's the scoop?" he said. "Who's our relief?"

"Hell," the company runner said. "I dunno. All I know is the captain said make it snappy 'cause the trucks can't wait."

"But there's still Japs in them caves."

"Tell it to the marines. You gonna come?"

"Yeah." Sgt. Barnard rubbed his eyes once more. "Tell him we'll be there as soon as I round up my platoon."

The company runner started slowly back toward the canefield where the Japs had escaped that morning. Sgt. Barnard watched him disappear, then saw Salty sitting on a stone with his rifle between his legs.

"You, Jones," he said. "You know where it is. Take these people to battalion CP while I round up the platoon. Take Willy with you, then go on down the road to where he said."

"Christ," Salty said without moving.

"Well, I dunno what else to do with 'em." Sgt. Barnard looked at the old woman squatting where she had stopped, at the mothers with babies, at the children. All their eyes were on the ground, the babies asleep or dead. The whole group was enough to turn your stomach, with open sores, gaunt bodies, rags, and swarms of flies which they did not bother to brush away. The fruits of conquest were hard to take. "They'll be better off in the POW compound, wherever it is," Sgt. Barnard said.

He sighed and turned to go down to the beach for the rest of the platoon. The runner plodded after him.

"Carry on, men," the runner said.

Salty swore. He sat there on the stone with the rifle between his legs, collecting strength and waiting until the last possible moment before moving. Then he pulled himself upright with the aid of his rifle. When he was standing, Willy too pulled himself erect. Together they stared at those miserable pieces of humanity caught up in battle and driven before it like animals. The prisoners stared at the ground, motionless.

"How do we do it?" Willy asked.

"Know any Jap phrases?" Salty said.

"Banzai," Willy said.

"Ha, ha, ha." Salty picked up his rifle. "I'll go in front and lead. You prod 'em from behind." He stepped forward and turned to the Japs or Chamorros or whatever they were. "Come on," he said. None of them moved. "Okay," he said louder. "Up. Follow me."

A couple of kids glanced at him. He waved his arm in a tired arc forward. The kids shuffled nervously and looked away. Willy wanted to shove one of them and get it over with, but he could not touch them. Finally Salty stepped over to the old woman. Her shriveled breasts were bare, her eyes sunken, her head bowed. Salty tapped her shoulder. Without glancing at him she stood up weakly. Behind her the others arose, then Salty started forward. They followed in silence, their eyes on the ground, and Willy brought up the tail of the ragged little column.

When they got to the battalion CP it was deserted except for a communications officer and five of his men loading a jeep trailer with radios and a switchboard and rolls of wire. Beside the narrow road ahead of the radio jeep were six stretchers covered by stained ponchos. Below the ponchos were feet in boondockers, and Willy knew they were six more dead marines. Beyond them was a flimsy shack with a bright flame tree on either side of it. A few banana trees grew at one end, and in front of the shack was a dead cow. Its four stiffened legs stuck out horizontally. All around the shack were empty foxholes where last night's CP had been.

The communications officer leaned against the jeep as Salty led the prisoners toward him. The sun was very hot, and the officer was sweating.

"Oh god," he said.

Salty held up his arm as a signal for the women and children to stop. They walked around him to the scant shade of banana trees, then squatted in their awkward oriental fashion. Willy rested the butt of his BAR on the ground and leaned on it.

"Prisoners, sir," Salty said to the lieutenant. "All yours."

"Oh god." The communications officer rubbed his eyes as Sgt.

Barnard had done when handed a problem too complex for his tired mind to cope with. "Why do they always tear-ass out of a place and leave everything snafu? I don't know what the hell to do with prisoners. I don't even know what to do with these stiff, poor bastards."

Salty sat down on the bumper of the jeep. It was not his problem. Willy sank down cross-legged in front of his prisoners. The other five men kept on loading gear into the trailer.

"Where's everyone else gone?" Salty said.

"To meet the trucks," the officer told him.

"What happened?"

"The general declared the island secure."

"Secure?" Salty shrugged. "Some yardbirds never get the word."

"He's in a hurry to get to Tinian." The lieutenant waved limply at flies circling his face. "Are they sending up any more prisoners?"

"I dunno. They only told me to deliver these."

"Oh god." The lieutenant shook his head. "Well, you'll have to stay with 'em. I've gotta take these men to set up a new CP. Bn-4 was supposed to send a truck for bodies, and I'll ask where it is."

"But sir," Salty said. "Our outfit's movin' now."

"Everybody's movin'," the lieutenant said. He waved toward the bodies and women and children. "We can't leave these people here though. I'll have 'em send two trucks. Load your prisoners on the first one."

"Oh hell, Lieutenant," Salty said.

"Well I can't help it. I can't do everything myself. Load bodies on the second truck and ride back with it."

"Back where? Where's the battalion gonna be?"

"I don't know. Near Garapan. Ask somebody."

"Why didn't they take these bodies earlier?"

"Don't blame me. I'm not Small Details Officer. I guess the road was only opened a while ago. I suppose they evacuated wounded first."

"Well for chrissake, Lieutenant. Get some trucks here fast."

"I'll do my best." The lieutenant sounded defensive. He went

around the jeep and got in beside the driver. Salty rose from the bumper, and the other men climbed onto the gear in the trailer. As they drove out of sight a hot silence settled behind them like dust. Willy felt abandoned in the middle of a battlefield soon to be recaptured. Hills seemed full of hidden menaces with watchful slant eyes.

"Damn the fickle finger of fate," Salty said. He sat down slowly in the sun with his back to Willy and the prisoners. His submissiveness suddenly infuriated Willy. As senior man present he could have done something more effective than taking orders from a rear-echelon shavetail. Now they were cut off from the platoon, the company, the whole outfit—guarding women and children and corpses among hills and canefields infested with hateful die-hard Japs.

For quite a while after the jeep had gone you could hear trucks on the left, but none of them came toward the shack. An occasional exchange of small-arms fire could still be heard from Marpi Point, and when the last truck motor died away all the wretchedness of Saipan closed in with the stink of dead cow.

Then the old bare-breasted woman stood up and started off around the shack. Willy forced himself to get up and block her path. Her movement might be some weird trick, the signal for an attack. The old woman tried to go around him, but he stepped in front of her again. She said something in a feeble voice, never lifting her eyes from the ground. She wore ragged baggy black drawers and looked as old as the sea, but he did not trust her. He raised his BAR and called Salty.

"What?" Salty answered without turning around.

"This old lady's up to something," Willy said.

Salty glanced at her just as she began patting her behind.

"She has to go to the head," Salty said.

Then Willy resented Salty's attitude all the more.

"Well what about it?" he asked.

"Oh for chrissake, Andy. You're a big boy. Take her around the shack and dig her a hole and cover it up."

"Why don't you do the dirty work?"

"I'll watch the others."

Willy wanted to throw his BAR at someone, to tell the whole contemptible world to go to hell. But he led the old woman around the shack and made her wait until he took his entrenching tool from his pack and dug her a sanitary little hole in the military fashion. She voided into it, then a couple of kids came around the shack. Willy tried to shoo them back, but they fixed big black eyes on him and patted their behinds. He dug them another hole and despised Salty for permitting this imbecility.

When he returned to the front of the shack he walked past the prisoners to one of the flame trees and sat down in a patch of shade.

"From now on you're captain of the head," he told Salty.

"Oh stop bitchin'," Salty said.

"Make me, you pissed-out pfc."

"I'll do it if I have to."

"You're too friggin' lazy for one thing."

"That's enough crap outta you."

"You talk big, but you don't scare me."

"I said knock it off, half-pint."

"Don't give me that guff. You're not a corporal any more."

"I don't have to be a corporal to clean your clock." There was no trace of friendliness in Salty's voice. They hated each other because they hated themselves and this whole senseless situation. "If you don't like dirty details, run on home to Sergeant Barnyard."

A baby bound to the back of the youngest woman began to cry, thinly and persistently like an aching tooth. The mother stared at the ground and did nothing. In a few moments the oldest woman moved around to brush vaguely at flies on the baby's face. Willy felt flies on his own skin as if they were idiot twitches in the atmosphere itself. The baby's thin wail was merely a minor condition of general torment, and gradually even the passage of time seemed to be melting into a gummy seal-coat over all this present stink and fatigue and nausea.

But at last they did hear a truck, its sound growing louder.

They saw dust rising in the canefield, then a six-by-six drove into sight and came up a little rise toward the shack. There was an armed rider in the cab beside the driver, and Salty stood up to wave them onto a side road where they could turn around.

"Get 'em the hell aboard," the driver said. He opened his door part way and leaned out, leaving the motor running as if he were in a big hurry. The armed rider climbed down from the cab to talk with Salty.

"The lieutenant says to stay with these bodies till the next truck gets here," he said. He sounded rather reverent about the bodies.

"What lieutenant?" Salty asked. "What next truck?"

"Hell, I dunno. Some lieutenant back there "

"Let's take 'em all in one load."

"No," the driver said quickly. "The stockade's up over the hill and we gotta go back the east side. It'll be a long drive before dark."

"But they might flub the other truck," Salty said.

"Nosir," the driver said. "I got my orders, and I ain't gonna mess with no stiffs. Just make it snappy with them prisoners."

"Semper Fi," Salty said. He jerked his arm toward the women and children. Willy stood up and led the old woman by the arm. The others followed, and when they were all loaded the truck drove away up the hill on the side road, leaving everything quieter than before.

Salty and Willy sat down in their old positions, ignoring each other. Salty took a can of chopped pork and egg yolk from his pack and ate it without offering Willy any. Willy found a package of Charms in his pocket and sucked on the candy without offering Salty any. They listened for another truck motor and once heard a jeep in the distance, but nothing came for them. The sun sank low in the west. Finally Salty stood up.

"They forgot about us," he said.

"So what are you gonna do about it?" Willy said.

"Will you wait here?" Salty had control of himself again.

"What for?"

"While I walk down to where the troops loaded and see if I

can catch a jeep or find out what the scoop is. Somebody should be there."

"Suit yourself," Willy said. He was too tired to move, too discouraged to believe it would do any good. He watched Salty shoulder his rifle and walk down the road into the canefield, feeling wholly detached from Salty's receding figure until the moment of its vanishing. Then Private Willy felt so acutely vulnerable that he scrambled in panic toward the nearest foxhole left from last night. One of those fanatic Japs who had walked through the lines that morning would gladly pick him off in cold blood, and he could not tolerate the inhuman filthiness of dying alone here. He tried to make himself vanish into the foxhole as if he had never been present, but when he lay prone in the hole his heartbeat and breathing seemed amplified for anyone on the island to hear. He knew the helpless terror Leeper must have been living with and believed that when Salty came back there would be seven corpses instead of six beside the dead cow.

But for a long time nothing happened except for the sun's sliding closer and closer to the rim of the ocean. Then he began to hear a truck and dared raise up a little. The sound came from behind him, from up in the hills where the truck with prisoners had gone, not from the direction Salty had taken. It grew louder, and then he saw an empty six-by-six come around a ridge. It was not the one that had taken the prisoners. The driver of this one apparently had no intention of stopping.

Suddenly Willy jumped out of his foxhole and ran to the intersection of the roads in a rage, waving his arms wildly. The truck skidded to a stop just before it hit him. The driver was alone and looked scared. Willy went around to his window. He was a big blond Swede with flaring nostrils and a long drip of flesh between them.

"These are the bodies," Willy said, stepping onto the running board.

"What bodies?" The Swede rubbed the gear shift nervously.

"Marine bodies. Help me load 'em."

"Oh no. I gotta get back to the motor pool before dark."

"We all gotta get back before dark. Give me a hand."

"Nosir. I'm no ambulance, buddy."

"You're headed toward the cemetery. It won't take long."

"Not on your life," the driver said. "I been lost in them hills all afternoon, and I ain't gonna get caught out after dark. If you wanta ride, okay. But I been spooked enough without no corpses."

He put the truck in gear and let it roll forward.

"They gotta go to the cemetery somehow," Willy said.

"Not with me. Get off or get in."

The Swede gassed the truck and turned south, picking up speed. Willy swore and jumped to the side of the road. Then he wished he had at least ridden down to where Salty was, but the truck had disappeared. He was alone once more, and now the sun was searing into the rim of the ocean. Alone at sunset with six dead buddies despised by a dumb Swede who surely owed them more than superstitious fear.

Willy sat down on the edge of a foxhole beside the row of corpses. He rubbed his stinging eyes and did not care what happened next. He did not care about anything. It might even be nice to lie on a stretcher dead, not knowing whether sun beat on you or darkness, not giving a damn whether a truck came or a bulldozer. He looked at the stretchers, then reached over and pulled the poncho from the face of the nearest corpse.

It was not a pretty face. It looked as if it had been frozen in the middle of a shriek. Its lips twisted back to show the teeth. The teeth were parted and yellow, the skin almost the color of the teeth. It had not been dead long enough to turn black. The last sunlight hit unflinching dead eyeballs, and Willy stared at them unmoved. That's all it was—the end of living, an end of awareness. There was nothing afterward except chemical change. There was nothing to be afraid of. It was better to be stopped in the middle of a shriek than to go on with torment.

Willy pulled the poncho down farther to see the dog tags lying on a hairless and unbreathing chest. He picked them up, not conscious of touching dead flesh because it was warm like the ground. He leaned forward to read the name, but it was an un-

known name. Then he wondered if Leeper had died, if he had really been wounded last night and lay here now. He got up and went down the line of stretchers, lifting each poncho and staring at each face before reading the dog tags. One fellow might have been from his company, but the others were strangers. Leeper was not there. It would not have meant much if he had been, because life and death had become little more than agony or the absence of it.

Then he realized that the truck was coming back again. He dropped the poncho over the sixth corpse, straightened it carefully, and knew without looking that it was the Swede's truck. When he did turn and see the truck, Salty was behind the steering wheel.

It did not surprise him. It seemed natural that Salty should have solved the problem like this. Beside him sat the Swede, and when they pulled into the side road and stopped Willy saw that the Swede's flaring nose was bloody, his face bruised, his body limp. He had been well beaten, and when Salty got out he dragged the Swede after him.

"Come on down, you sad sack," Salty said. "I'm not gonna take a chance on you drivin' away while we load 'em."

"You'll pay for this," the Swede said. He was sobbing, from the beating or exertion or fright. "They'll court-martial you for this."

"You wouldn't dare tell 'em what you did," Salty said. He shoved the Swede to the rear of the truck and slapped him across the face. "You wouldn't dare tell 'em you were too chicken to haul dead buddies." He pushed the driver to the ground and looked as if he might kick him. "I'd as soon shoot you as not, so don't pull any funny stuff."

The driver sobbed with his head on his knees while Willy and Salty heaved the six stretchers onto the back of the truck. They worked clumsily, sweating and worn to insensibility. When they climbed into the cab with the driver between them it was already dusk, but they reached Flores Point before total darkness came. The road there seemed built on piles of swollen Jap corpses where

the Army had met its big counterattack, and the stench of gases from mass decomposition made the Swede gag. He leaned across Willy to vomit out the window, then sat quivering between them while Salty picked his way along a dark road toward Charan Kanoa. From time to time an MP appeared in front of the truck like an armed ghost to halt them and question them and guide them on.

When they found the division cemetery it was too late to do anything but spread their ponchos on the ground and go to sleep. They all slept because there was no firing or shelling or any strength left in them. The next morning they turned the bodies over to the graves registration section and let the Swede drive them back to their own outfit near Garapan. He was all right then, as if a new day made a big difference.

"I'm real sorry, Jones," he said when Willy and Salty got out. "I guess I was lost in them hills too long yesterday."

"Forget it," Salty said. He shook the driver's hand. "But on Tinian don't pass up a dead buddy. It might be me."

*Death is the worst; a fate which all must try;
And for our country, 'tis a bliss to die.*

chapter 8

1

Guam was invaded while they reorganized, but that seemed neither here nor there. When they went aboard ship to sail four miles south to Tinian, navy life looked better than ever. Flies came out from the islands and it was very hot, yet you did not have to dig straddle trenches or foxholes. You could take salt-water showers and undress to sleep. There was decent chow, cold drinking water, and no smell of death.

They made a feint down by Tinian Town before landing. The battleship *Colorado* took hits from shore batteries, and it looked bad for ground troops. But the next day when they went ashore on northern beaches behind the Fourth Division there was not much to it.

They were in Higgins boats that time. Lt. McGhee had been discharged from the hospital and stood beside the coxswain, looking pale but otherwise recovered. For some obscure reason in all the uproar he had been promoted to first lieutenant. Private Willy could see a tarnished silver bar pinned to the underside of his dungaree collar. The collar was caught-up by the strap of his gas-mask carrier, and Willy meant to tell him about it before they

went in. The silver bar had been the gift of a graves registration officer who had saved it for him.

Then a shell exploded on the surface of the water between Higgins boats at the line of departure, and Private Willy forgot the silver bar. He crouched low, his mouth dry and his breathing shallow from that helpless anticipation not so much of death as of suffering—possible horrors of consciousness before the merciful oblivion of death. You finished Saipan only to face Tinian. You survived one only to feed another.

He glanced at Salty crouched beside him, his bearded face strained and unsmiling. Salty appeared less a pillar of strength than at any time since their first foxhole on Tarawa. You can only put up with so many flying missiles before the law of averages shuts in on you, and Salty seemed withdrawn in a suspicion that this was once too often.

Yet the Fourth Division had absorbed the worst of the landing, and their first day on Tinian passed without a shot fired near them. They assembled inland for the night as if on a field problem, cautiously elated to get so far without being pounded every inch of the way. The next day they walked upright across the big airport to swing south on the eastern side of the island, still meeting no serious opposition.

There were no dominant central hills on Tinian. Its elevation came from a series of low cliffs rising like terraces, and relative flatness gave it an appearance of quick conquest that Saipan had never had. It looked small on the map as well as in fact, and each step brought you closer to a goal that might not mean the end of misery but at least meant the end of intense misery until you had to invade some other island. By sunset of the second day Private Willy considered Tinian with a shred of hope. From a height overlooking its checkerboard of canefields and jungles, like an aerial photograph, he decided that the finish of this campaign could not be impossibly far away, and he might survive. He actually might.

The following day it rained all day. There was even a rumble of natural thunder in the sky. It sounded rather quaint and old-fashioned above the barrage of artillery being laid down ahead

of them by big guns on Saipan and rocket trucks and smaller artillery following them. But through the downpour Private Willy moved mostly upright and almost exuberant. Warm rain ran from his poncho onto the legs of his dungarees and splashed up from the ground to soak him to the waist. Rain dripped off his helmet onto his neck and soaked his dungaree blouse. His feet were sopping wet in spite of dubbin' on his boondockers, and heavy mud stuck to his soles in thick layers. Yet he was warm and contented. Patrols ahead of the battalion searched for the enemy with hardly any success. They worked alternately through canefields and jungles and found little resistance. Tinian was no Saipan or Tarawa, and it was remarkably satisfying to march down an island without Japs fighting every inch of the way and then from behind.

"Think it'll be a walkaway all the way?" he asked Salty when they stopped at noon to let the right flank catch up with them.

"I hope so," Salty said. He looked better now too, as if in the boat he had been preoccupied with seasickness instead of fear. "They say the Guadalcanal boys go home as soon as this one's over."

"They should," Willy said. "You deserve it, Salty."

"But knock 'wood," Salty said. "Those friggin' Nips never acted like this before. Might make a big banzai on the south end."

"Anyway I never felt better on a campaign," Willy said.

Salty smiled. Willy wondered if either of them ever smiled on Saipan.

"You're young," Salty said. "That rest aboard ship fixed you up. That's why the Corps likes you kids better than us old duffers."

They fought a couple of skirmishes during the damp afternoon and took a few casualties, yet they covered a lot of ground and holed up well before dark with plenty of time to put out barbed wire and lay down excellent fields of fire. It had stopped raining, and Private Willy felt so well that he built a small fire and heated cans of C ration for himself and Salty while it was still light. The meat and beans tasted wonderful, and he ate all the crackers and candy in the dry part of his ration, finishing what Salty left and wanting more. Then he took the first watch until midnight, com-

fortably tired but not wretchedly tense. After midnight he slept soundly.

The next morning Private Willy woke up prostrate with dengue.

2

"What's the matter?" Salty asked when he did not get up.

"Nothing," Willy said. There were no ordinary symptoms like nausea or cramps. He had certainly been more miserable at other times, yet his body had become an aching immobile lump. He heard Salty offer him food, felt no hunger. He heard Sgt. Barnard pass the word to stand by to move out, felt no compulsion to rise from his foxhole. He seemed entirely divorced from that kind of unnecessary activity. He was not even clearly aware of the sun's heat or an unaccountable chill beneath his sweat. He was merely there in a foxhole on his face and perfectly willing to stay exactly there.

"Don't you feel good?" Salty squatted beside him.

"I only want to rest till we move out," Willy said.

"They passed the word. Better get ready."

"I'm ready."

Willy forced himself to turn over and sit up. He grew dizzy and blinked. Salty pulled his head back by the hair.

"You don't look good," he said. "Those blue eyes look glassy."

"Maybe I don't feel so hot," Willy said.

When Salty let go of his hair, his head fell forward with a jerk. He stood up in his foxhole, then sat down abruptly on the edge of it.

"God," he said. "How come I'm so beat?"

"Better see the corpsman before we start."

"No. I'll be all right."

He dragged his clip belt out of the hole and fastened it around his waist. It was incredibly heavy. He dragged out his gas-mask carrier and slipped its strap over his shoulder, letting the weight rest on the ground. Then he picked up his helmet and put it on.

His neck bent sideways with its weight. After two attempts he raised the BAR upright between his legs. He felt like a cub scout inside all that combat gear and was still minus his pack.

"Where's my pack, Salty?" he said.

"We cached 'em on the beach."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot."

"You've had it, Andy." Salty's bleached blue eyes looked paternally worried. "Leave your BAR with me and head for sick bay."

"Hell no," Willy said. "I'm only groggy from sleep."

"That's a crock of stuff. You're sick, and you'll get yourself shot if you try to keep going." Salty snorted at a humorous thought. "Go on back. Maybe you'll get evacuated."

"Maybe I got combat fatigue," Willy said. He thought that was awfully funny and laughed without making a sound.

"Yeah," Salty said. "But more likely it's dengue."

"Well I can't quit on accounta that."

"Oh for chrissake." Salty leaned forward and unsnapped Willy's clip belt. "It's not quittin'. When you're sick you're no good up here. Remember Leeper. Now gimme that BAR and chop-chop to sick bay."

Willy hated letting his outfit down but thought the corpsman might give him a shot of something to keep him going. He exchanged weapons with Salty and started for the company CP. After pressing his hot forehead once the corpsman told him to report to the battalion aid station. Willy had believed that if you could still walk you were not incapacitated, so while the corpsman fastened a cloth medical tag to his dungaree blouse he decided to sneak back to his platoon. But before the corpsman released him Sgt. Barnard stepped over from the company radio where platoon leaders were waiting for orders to move out.

"What's the matter there, Willy?" the sergeant asked.

"Dengue, I guess. But I'd like to stick here."

"No," the corpsman said. "You got a fever like a house afire."

"Better not," Sgt. Barnard told him. He did not even hold his shoulders up for perfect posture any more, as if he had finally

realized that physical culture would not win the war. Then Lt. McGhee came toward them, and Willy felt second-rate for being sick when the lieutenant had had shrapnel in his chest.

"Good god," Lt. McGhee said. "Are we losing Willy too?"

"I'm all right, Mr. McGhee. It's the chancre mechanic's idea."

"He's got breakbone fever," the corpsman said.

"Lucky boy." Lt. McGhee put his arm across Willy's shoulders.

"Now you can spend all day in the sack like I did."

"Honest, Lieutenant. I'd rather stay with the outfit."

"Don't be a damned fool." McGhee turned him around and headed him along a road of jeep tracks. "You need a rest. Where's your BAR?"

"Jones has it."

"Fine. There's nothing to worry about. This one's a cinch."

"But I shouldn't poop out." Willy stopped. He felt worse about walking away from his friends than he did about anything else.

"Oh hell," the lieutenant said. "You did a swell job when we needed you, now take it easy for a change." He frowned a little and let his arm drop. "By the way, were you with Leeper the night he cracked up?"

"Yessir. In the next hole."

"They had him emptying bedpans at the hospital on Saipan."

"Was he all right?"

"I think so. What happened that night?"

"A grenade went off in front of him. Was he hit?"

"Not a scratch. Didn't you see him afterwards?"

"Only in the dark. Aren't they gonna evacuate him?"

"I doubt it. They think he's faking."

"Oh shit, Lieutenant." He felt persecuted for Leeper's sake. "His nerve was shot before that. Can't they give him a break?"

"You don't get evacuated unless you lose both legs." The lieutenant scratched his beard and sighed. "I tried to tell 'em he was no good, but they wouldn't listen." He smiled and turned Willy toward the rear once more. "Now go on before you keel over."

"I could help out at platoon headquarters," Willy said.

"Balls. You've done your share. See you later."

"Well, okay. Good luck, Mr. McGhee."

"Take care of yourself, Willy."

He followed jeep tracks through a canefield to a more definite road, then walked slowly along it to the battalion CP. The aid station had already been packed to move forward, but he headed for the pile of litters beside a jeep ambulance. Doctors and corpsmen were lying with patients in the shade of a breadfruit tree. Near them a tank waited for orders, its motor going. Beyond it stood the ruins of a burned house, and Willy thought it looked like a stage set for *Gone With the Wind* modernized. He was panting and exhausted from his short walk and did not recognize any of the corpsmen or doctors. Then Doc Frechette called to him. He was the senior battalion medical officer now, but lying there in dirty dungarees he looked like somebody's orderly.

"What's the trouble?" Doc Frechette asked. "A dose of clap?"

"Nosir." Willy sat down. "They think it's dengue."

"Tough titty. No Purple Heart for dengue."

He rolled onto his side and reached for a large can sitting on top of medical boxes stacked beside the litters. From the can he took a jar of thermometers in pink alcohol. He unscrewed the lid, removed one thermometer deftly, shook it, read it, and stuck it in Willy's mouth.

"General malaise?" he asked, lying back with his hands beneath his head, his legs crossed. "Bones ache?"

Private Willy nodded, a bitter sting of alcohol beneath his tongue. The last alcohol he had tasted with the doctor had been on Christmas Eve in Hawaii, but he doubted if Frechette remembered that. The guys said he was a good doctor though. In a few minutes he took the thermometer from Willy's mouth and read it again.

"Only a hundred and three," he said. He replaced the thermometer in the jar. "Can't you scrape up a small cut for a Purple Heart?"

"Nosir," Willy said. "I'm all right, except I feel so lousy."

The doc grinned, his eyes bright and watchful as if he might remember Christmas after all. Then he made a notation on Willy's tag.

"There'll be a Bn-4 jeep along pretty soon," he said. "You can ride back to the collecting section with these other men."

"Couldn't I stay with my platoon, Doc?"

"God no. They've got enough to do without taking care of delirious dengue patients, and a posthumous Purple Heart wouldn't help you."

So there was a queer hiatus for Private Willy, four vague days spent in a hospital section beside the Tinian airport. The merely sick stayed there in tents beside a portable operating room within a high dirt revetment that Japs had built to protect their planes. But already friendly planes were landing on the field to shuttle serious casualties back to Saipan. Lesser wounded were evacuated to ships, and even in the stupor of dengue Private Willy wondered why men bothered to plan such systematic care for other men sent out to be systematically butchered. Something about it seemed illogical.

During those four days he felt encased in ache and fever like a lungfish baked in mud. On a bare cot inside a sagging tent he lay without removing his dungarees, which had become part of him. He only took off his shoes, covered up with a blanket required by the inexplicable chill accompanying his fever, then withdrew into suffering as you withdraw into fear under fire—not so much conscious of suffering as dismayed by a body laid low by a mosquito bite. It took shell fragments or steel bullets to knock down better men, and sometimes he was heartbroken at the sight of those men.

They set amputees and badly wounded in his tent to wait for evacuating planes. One fellow had his abdomen all ripped open, and a number of rubber drains ran out of him. He groaned and bubbled as he breathed, and Willy watched as if hypnotized. Another fellow had a fantastic white cast around his chest and arms, both arms propped in the air like plaster tree stumps. You could not tell whether he breathed at all, and these mutilated

men fed Willy's sense of guilt for having failed in the middle of duty. Bad wounds and death were the ultimate sacrifices in this war; other discomforts hardly counted. He could not feel sorry for himself when true casualties were in the tent, yet they did not revive his strength or ambition either.

Once in a while a skinny corpsman brought around a big brown bottle of APC tablets and let the patients help themselves. He had dengue too, but everyone seemed to be getting it. Private Willy always took a couple of tablets and hoped they would cure him, but afterward he felt no change whatsoever. He slept a great deal and the rest of the time stared out of fever and aching eyes at the green mesh of his mosquito net or waiting casualties. When no casualties were present his mind worked with peculiar clarity to a background of lilting music that he finally recognized and put words to:

*Mairzy doats, and doazy doats,
And little Andy Willy . . .*

This irrelevant tune occurred and reoccurred constantly, like a theme song in a movie. With it scenes from his past rollicked through his head as if projected by some inner being who wished to amuse him. He would see Hanford, Washington, where cherries and apples and asparagus grew near the Columbia River and where a big bad brother came and went and did no harm. Then he would see Spokane among low hills and evergreens, and still hearing that silly tune he would see Judy.

*Mairzy doats, and doazy doats,
And little Judy Powell . . .*

For four feverish days she was more real than foxholes. It was not quite delirium, because he could always clear his eyes and focus them on green mosquito net or other cots inside the tent, yet Judy would appear and reappear as fresh and clean and adorable as though he had been with her yesterday. She was more real than Whatchy in Hawaii or anything that had happened since

his leaving Spokane, and he was amazed to find her intact in memory after all these months. He longed to brush back her crisp hair, to feel her smooth face between his hands, to smell the fragrance of decency about her. He could almost hear her whisper, "I love you, I'll always love you. . . ." But the sound track got confused, and he heard that other thing more clearly:

*Mairzy doats, and doazy doats,
And little Judy Willy . . .*

Maybe he said Judy Willy out loud once or twice, because he would have to focus very hard on the green mosquito net in order to convince himself that he was alone on Tinian and not speaking his wife's name directly to her. He wanted her for his wife more than ever. It seemed more essential, as if fever had burned out intervening distractions and desires like those drunken deals on Hawaii, purging him of a brutality that the Marine Corps considered ideal. You could not be ideally brutal if you loved someone deeply, and there she was. He could almost feel her in his arms again, their lips fusing, their lives fusing. . . .

*Mairzy doats, and doazy doats,
And little tiny Willys . . .*

But he did not let himself get mixed up too much. Little tiny Willys were in the future, and he could only dwell on the past. There might be a future since they were now within 1500 miles of Tokyo, but he did not trust it yet. He merely accepted with a certain pride the fact that he had so far endured this incredibly sordid life among flying shells, and there would be time enough to look ahead after he had been declared an ex-marine. Meanwhile as hot sun or steaming rain beat down on the hospital tent, his peculiarly vivid memories flowed on and on to the blithe accompaniment of "Mairzy Doats."

When bodily functions aroused him, he slipped out from under the mosquito net and put on heavy boondockers without lacing them. Then he walked like an old man to the unscreened wooden

head—prosaic, splintery, yet remarkable because some farsighted soul had had it brought along on this high-explosive operation. His trickle of urine burned; his bowels gave up a hot fluid without effort. After relieving himself and resting a moment, he walked slowly back to the revetment. Each step jarred his nerve terminals with a bright white shock of light, and he walked carefully to prevent his whole nervous system from blowing a fuse. Then lying flat on his aching back under the mosquito net, he watched more past scenes projected into his aching head.

At mealtimes he scraped chocolate D ration into his mouth with his front teeth and tried to work up enough saliva to dissolve it. Most of the gritty chocolate stuck dryly in his throat, and finally he had to wash it down with swigs of water. The water itself was warm and nauseating from container taste, but in spite of revulsion he tried to nourish his body. A few corpsmen and doctors and patients cooked 10-in-1 rations, but the thought of hearty food turned his stomach altogether.

Then one day jeep ambulances came frequently to the revetment. The front lines had run into trouble, but Willy stayed in his sack because he did not want to know if his own outfit was involved. He found out anyway. An ambulance driver squatted in the shade outside the tent and told a corpsman about it.

“Our own artillery,” Willy heard the driver saying.

“No kiddin’,” the corpsman said. “Why didn’t they stop it?”

“The son-of-a-bitchin’ colonel wouldn’t. Know what he said?”

“No. What?”

“He says,” and the driver dropped his voice to a guttural drawl, “‘Gotta expect some casualties on such close support.’”

“Why the son of a bitch,” the corpsman said.

“You can say that again.”

“Didn’t he do anything?”

“Well, the captain knew the artillery was registered wrong, see. So he hauls-ass back to the CP and storms right up to the colonel. ‘Colonel,’ he says, ‘if you don’t want my whole company wiped out, you damn well better call off that friggin’ artillery right now.’ And you know what the colonel says?”

"No. What?"

"He sits back on his big fat ass and takes a drag on his pipe and says, calm as you please," and the driver dropped his voice again to an imitative drawl, "he says, 'Bad as all that, eh?' "

"Why the son of a bitch," the corpsman said

"You can say that again," the driver said.

I should be there, Willy thought. It's not right to miss it.

The next morning his fever had broken. He woke up feeling limp, as if the baked-on case of ache and fever had fallen off before a new protective crust had formed beneath it. The skinny corpsman with the bottle of APC tablets told him to stick around another day. His own weakness told him he should, yet he felt duty-bound to take his chance at the front with everyone else. He paced feebly from his tent to the road beside the revetment, no longer feeling shocks of light at his nerve terminals, worried by the silence toward the lines. In the afternoon a jeep ambulance from his battalion drove up with more dengue patients, and Private Willy asked to be discharged. He collected his gear from beneath his cot in the sagging tent, tied his shoelaces, and climbed aboard the ambulance to ride back to the front.

3

"Hi, Andy," Salty said. "How's the kid?"

"Pretty good," Willy said.

"Where'd they put you?"

"Division hospital."

"Any nurses?"

"Hell no."

"T. S. I thought you'd be shackled up."

"Dreamer. How's it been up here?"

"Not bad. They say the island's secure."

"Swell."

He sat down weakly at the edge of Salty's foxhole, recognizing his BAR in it. He felt let down because he had hurried to get back

and they did not need him. The platoon looked filthy and tired but no worse than when he had left. They were spread out in woods above cliffs which they patrolled daily. Their foxholes were scattered under trees like diggings of kids in a wooded lot, and men slept or examined souvenirs or cleaned weapons as usual. Salty and two other guys sat around a fire of composition C-2. Over the fire hung an old bucket full of stewing chicken. They looked like a trio of hobos in a stateside jungle, and Willy felt like an uninvited guest. The smell of chicken made his mouth water for the first time since he had gotten dengue.

"What's the scuttlebutt?" he asked, looking away from the fire.

"They say us short-timers go stateside next week," Salty said.

It took a minute for that to soak in. Short-timers were men with a long time overseas and a short time to wait for rotation out of combat areas. Salty was a short-timer, but it had never really seemed possible that anything would come of it. Willy glanced at him, hoping the remark was a joke. But Salty was serious, and suddenly Willy felt immeasurably depressed. He would lose his best friend.

"Jeez," he said. "That's swell."

"Almost too good to be true." Salty shook his head and stared through Willy. "But the colonel says so himself."

"Great." Willy looked away. His eyes were watering, but he believed it was from being sick. In any case he did not dare think of Salty Jones leaving this life of foxholes for an unimaginable return Home. "God knows it's time, Salty."

He felt Salty's hand on his knee but could not look around.

"Cheer up," Salty said. "You'll be rotated in another year."

"Another year," Willy said. It was an abyss at the bottom of last year's abyss, a hollowness of being where you did not want to be and dreading every move that might help end it or might end you. Last year he had had the support of this pale-eyed guy who somehow **made** pestilential islands bearable. Without him there would be an emptiness larger than when Bonelli died, or Chick Woodruff, or when Leeper cracked up. One by one they

dropped away, and there in hot shade beneath the trees Willy could not believe that he would ever survive another year. He was too small and spent.

All at once the sound of a shot cracked the silence. Everyone but Willy scurried for a foxhole. He looked around blankly.

"Hit the deck," Salty told him.

A delayed realization of front-line danger struck him, and he rolled into the foxhole beside Salty. The weight of his body made his arms tremble as he tried to brace himself for action. He felt infinitely worse than he had in the worst moments of dengue.

"I thought you said it was secure," he said.

"You know the Japs." Salty waited, ready to fire.

Then the word was passed from hole to hole.

"Relax. Accidental discharge in the second platoon."

They were sitting around the fire again when Sgt. Barnard came.

"Now hear this," he bellowed in his old boot-camp style. "You people have been warned about carelessness, and the colonel says the next AD will get a court-martial. Nobody in my platoon's gonna foul up, so check your safeties and stand by for inspection."

"Oh my aching back," Salty said. He picked up the BAR and traded it with Willy for his own rifle. "Two years of it, Andy. Two years I've put up with this crap. You can't imagine how much it means to get the hell out of here at last."

4

The regiment pulled back to a rest area east of Tinian Town and waited for transportation to Saipan. One afternoon officer replacements arrived, and Willy's company and battalion both got new commanders. The next morning all short-timers were notified that they would go aboard ship as soon as it put into the harbor. All Guadalcanal veterans, the ones who had survived malaria, Tarawa, Saipan, and Tinian, were going home. They wore faint smiles like men pleased in their sleep. They moved and spoke gently as if they did not want to wake themselves up. They began to drift

apart from men who were staying, as though former buddies had not Seen the Light and probably never would.

But Salty felt wretched. He was coming down with dengue.

"Why don't you turn in?" Willy asked.

"I can't," Salty said. He was lying a couple of yards away with his head on his pack and his rifle beside him, ready to move out when the order came. "They'd goof up my records, and I can't afford to miss this boat. I'll turn in after I get aboard."

"Yeah," Willy said. "The hospital doesn't help much anyway."

He sat in the sun cleaning his BAR. He did not really care if the BAR rusted shut, but Sgt. Barnard had called a weapons inspection and had to be satisfied. The routine could not stop just because a few men were leaving, and it was better to keep doing something.

They were bivouacked at the edge of a little garden behind a tin-roofed shack with sliding paper doors and hardwood floors. Lt. McGhee had his command post in the shack and guarded the garden from other platoons. His own men foraged for vegetables to stew with an occasional stray chicken and pad out the gagging diet of packaged rations. At the moment most men had disassembled their weapons to clean them, but Salty had lost all interest in that sort of thing.

"I'd crawl on my hands and knees to catch this boat," he said.

"Want me to get some more APC tablets for you?"

"No, Andy. The last ones haven't dissolved yet."

Salty had shaved that morning. His face looked bald and defenseless again. It looked funny too, because he had a fungus infection on his upper lip which the corpsman had painted with a purple fungicide. The purple smear swept around one nostril like half a jaunty mustache. He wore no skivvy shirt under his open blouse, and his lean body seemed more fragile than it should. His eyes were closed against the sun, and Willy wished the boat would come so Salty could go aboard and get it over with. It hurt to watch him. He was so tired, so sick, so happy.

"You know, Andy," he said without opening his eyes. "What scares me is that Ruby hasn't written since we left Hawoya. Her

last letter mentioned an operation she might have, and what if she's sick?"

"She'll be all right," Willy said. He wanted to sound reassuring but never could about Ruby. For some reason he seemed to know something about her that he should not know, which was of course impossible.

"I suppose," Salty said. "Her mother'd write if she wasn't." He grinned a little in the far-off way of those men going stateside. "Just think," he said. "I'll be able to get married and hold my head up, Andy. I won't have to worry any more about what we've done to the girls. And we'll be married in church, no matter if you don't believe in God. Are you still an atheist, Andy?"

"I don't know, Salty. What difference does it make?"

"Well, I respect your opinion. You've got a head on your shoulders. I've been real proud to be your foxhole buddy, and it's hard to realize we'll split up now." He opened his eyes for a moment and squinted at the sky, then closed them again. "It's like you been knocked over the head and don't know whether you'll come to alive or dead. I've thought so much about Coeur d'Alene lately it's like I'm already there."

"That's the fever," Willy said. "In the hospital I could see stateside with my eyes wide open. Do you hear music too?"

"Voices," Salty said. "Kids' voices."

Willy began to assemble his BAR. He was very clumsy with small parts, and his throat kept tightening up because it was so overwhelming to think of Salty Jones going back to a common-law wife and children and wonderful warless places like Coeur d'Alene and Pend Oreille and Spokane. Salty had Judy's address and had promised to see her and tell her what Andy was doing, and it drove you nutty to think that your best friend would be visiting Home in a few weeks while you stayed here and despaired of ever returning. Another year . . .

"This might surprise you," Salty was saying almost to himself. "But actually the thing I miss most is the kids."

"I suppose so," Willy said. He cleared his throat.

"Honest, Andy. I love those girls, even the one I haven't seen.

But I'd like a son too, to top it off. That's what I want to get busy on now." He smiled, lying there on his back with that silly purple mustache beneath one nostril. "You see, if I can get married this time home and make it all right for Ruby and the girls, and then get a son started, I won't mind coming back overseas to finish up the war." He sighed. "That's the main thing. After the war's over I'll buy us a place in the Spokane Valley and raise the whole family like they should be raised. I'm a good worker, Andy. I can be a good father to those kids. I won't let my daughters grow up to pull any harebrained stunt like Ruby and me did. I'll see that they finish school and marry some fine upstanding fellow like yourself."

"Nobody's upstanding after the Marine Corps," Willy said. He tested the operation of his assembled BAR. Salty opened his eyes to watch him, then sat up a little with his back against his pack.

"Don't get bitter, Andy," he said. "It's a nasty job, but I guess it has to be done. Maybe it even does us good to get down to bed-rock and learn how little we really need to keep us happy." He rubbed his knee. "I hate like the devil to leave you out here."

"I hate to see you go." Willy glanced at two naked men beside a concrete cistern in front of the command shack. They were dipping up water and washing themselves. Their bodies were brown to the waist, but below that they were white. The two halves looked mismatched.

"Keep in touch so we can get together sometime," Salty said.

"Sure. And don't worry. Sergeant Barnyard will look after me."

"He's a pretty good joe, Andy. When's he gonna inspect weapons?"

"In about fifteen minutes."

"How's to touch up mine a bit this last time?"

"Sure, Salty."

Willy was sitting cross-legged opposite him. He leaned sideways to put his BAR on his poncho out of the dirt, and he meant then to lean forward and take Salty's rifle directly from him. But apparently Salty misjudged his intention or was too dazed from dengue to care what he was doing. In any case everything went wrong.

Salty tossed his rifle to Willy, and Willy was not ready to catch it. When he looked up the M-1 was already coming toward him, and he was badly off balance. Maybe it was also an awkward toss on Salty's part since he was so weak, but before either of them could warn the other the rifle was out of Salty's hands and coming straight toward Willy's head, butt first, with the muzzle aimed at Salty.

Willy threw his hands up more to fend it off than to catch it, yet somehow he did catch it. His hands automatically closed to hold it, and then it fired. As usual Salty had the piece ready with a round in the chamber. The safety had not been on or was knocked off as the weapon hit Willy's hands, he never knew which. He only knew that the rifle discharged as soon as he touched it.

He heard the explosion and felt the butt plate slam into the corner of his mouth and across his chin. Then he went numb. His vision must have been obscured for a second, but it seemed as if he saw Salty's pale blue eyes go wide immediately and his mouth drop open beneath the purple fungicide on his upper lip. Then Salty's hands twitched toward a hole in his lean belly, and his bleached blue eyes stared at Willy as if he had never seen him before and were betrayed by a stranger.

"Salty!" Willy said.

But he could not move. The rifle had settled into his lap and seemed to pin him to the ground. It had drawn his arms down with it so that he held the rifle as if he had just fired an intentional shot—his left hand forward on the upper hand guard, his right hand under the trigger guard. But he felt nothing in his own body except a stinging on his chin where the rifle butt had hit, like a patch of pain grafted onto a paralytic. And he did not see anything except Salty's bleached blue eyes staring at him from a bald shocked face with an insane purple mustache. But he could tell from the way the eyes grew more bleached that life must be going out of them, and that was insufferable.

"Salty!" he said again, choking on it.

Then people were converging on him from all sides. He saw the two naked men with mismated bodies running up behind Salty.

"What happened?" he heard Lt. McGhee ask. He tried to reply that he was going to do a little favor for Salty before Salty caught the boat home, but words would not form because something had wrenched the sense out of them and stuffed his throat full of broken sounds.

Then a corpsman bent over Salty, several other men crowded around him, and Willy could not see him any more. He felt a blind panic and tried to get up. He had to get over there and force life back into those eyes, to let everyone know there had been a mistake. So much depended on it, because at last Salty had his chance to go home and marry his wife and see his kids and make up for more than two years of filth and corruption out here fighting for his turn to go home.

But Willy could not move. Both Lt. McGhee and Sgt. Barnard were holding him, and all he could do was struggle convulsively.

"Willy," Lt. McGhee said, shaking him. "What happened?"

"Salty!" Willy cried. "Wait, Salty!"

But Salty had been dead before anyone reached him, shot upward through the stomach into the heart.

Still the succeeding flame expels the last.

chapter 9

1

"I love you," Beecher Neal said soberly. Judy stiffened. He had never told her that before.

"Everybody'll hear you." She glanced at the next table.

"I don't care."

"Finish your drink and let's go."

Beecher sat back in his chair and smiled. It was a slightly twisted smile. The blind side of his face never reacted as well as the other side, and you never knew whether his amusement was genuine or warped.

"Now you think I'm drunk again," he said.

"Oh no." Judy smiled too, yet she was not sure of anything with Beecher. Something about him did not let her think clearly. She only felt keyed up. "But it's late, and I've got to get home."

"Why don't you forget this patriotic effort once?" He took a drink of his bourbon and water without finishing it, then set the glass on the table between them, watching her with unexpected tenderness. She avoided his good eye by staring at the white scar bisecting his left eyebrow, longing to touch it with her fingertips.

"First the USO," he said. "Now the nurse's aide business. What do you get out of it, Judy?"

"I like to work. I like to keep busy."

"You're a woman before your time."

"We all have to grow up faster nowadays."

"But you're so serious about it."

"I'll never catch up with what you've done."

"I didn't do a damned thing." Judy looked away from his scar and wished she had not referred to it. His voice always became corrosive then. "I just followed the crowd and got the stuffing knocked out of me. It didn't take long or accomplish much."

Across his shoulder she saw sailors and soldiers and marines with very few girls packed into this dim little Coeur d'Alene bar. She was still uneasy in such places. Until a couple of months ago she had never been in one, and even now she could not understand why servicemen preferred to drink up their evenings rather than go to a USO. They stood at the bar and argued over nothing intelligible. They sat at tables and laughed hollowly from time to time. They stood by the juke box and tapped their feet or snapped their fingers in an absent-minded way while their eyes searched for something that was never there. They almost slobbered with singleness of purpose if they were with a girl, and Judy disliked the whole thick smoky atmosphere. She wished Beecher no longer found it necessary to follow the servicemen's pattern. He wore civilian clothes these days and had a greater freedom.

"Well," she said. "When my stuffing gets knocked out, I'll quit."

"How will you arrange that?" he asked. "Join the WACs?"

"Maybe the BAMs." He had been drunk the night he told her why women marines were called BAMs. It annoyed him to have her pick up a vulgar expression of his, but the idea of her enlisting annoyed him more.

"Don't even think it," he said. "You're too good for a bunch of rear-echelon Romeos. Stick to maternity wards if you have to help."

"Why am I too good for your outfit?"

"Because I know the score, and you don't."

"Oh fiddle." She was tired of hearing how good she was. "Why worry about me? You never worry about yourself."

He suddenly smiled again in his warped way, sitting crosswise in the chair with one arm across its back. Maybe he was patronizing her, yet beneath his marred handsomeness she thought she saw uncertainty.

"I take care of myself all right," he said.

"How?"

"Like this." He raised his glass and took a drink.

"Where does that get you?"

"It makes up for lost time and a lost eye."

"You'll end up in an alcoholic ward."

He shrugged and set the glass down, still smiling.

"It's fun while it lasts. Don't I deserve some fun?"

"Maybe your idea of fun needs overhauling."

"Oh hell, Judy." He sat forward and picked up a pack of cigarettes. He offered her one, but she refused. Sometimes she smoked, yet she did not enjoy it enough to waste his cigarettes even though the shortage seemed to bother him no more than the gasoline shortage. He always had a popular brand of cigarettes and plenty of gas coupons for his father's car. "You're beginning to sound like my mother," he said.

"Well, I just don't see your point."

"Neither does Mother." He lit a cigarette impatiently. "Neither of you realize that war is uglier than anything they tell you in books or newsreels or Sunday School. And it's not just me and my eye, Judy. You can't imagine how dirty combat gets, so what's the point of being decent when half the world is out killing itself? I can't pretend to be mama's little darling any more. I can't stay home every night and play bridge."

"I didn't mean you should," she said.

"It's what Mother means. And you both act like I ought to pick up civilian life as if New Georgia had been a bad dream and the war was somebody else's. Christ, Judy. It isn't as simple as that."

"Of course not. But at least you could take a job."

"In Dad's stockroom, I suppose?"

"Why not?" She got very angry when he brushed aside suggestions of normal activity. She tried to understand him but could not understand his refusal to start over. "Or you could go back to school this fall. From what I hear they occasionally drink in college too."

"Oh sure," he said. "Tea at the sororities, a stag binge with 4-F fellows at the fraternity. They really live it up."

"Well no matter what you damned tough marines go through, you might meet us crummy civilians halfway since you have to live with us."

He laughed. He leaned across his glass on the table and examined her face closely while he laughed at her indignation. He did not look insolent or bitter then. She blushed and glanced down at her half-full glass, the same drink she had ordered when they got there.

"Oh brother," he said. "You'd make a great BAM top sergeant."

She felt that sailors at the next table must be listening. She wanted to go home. She had to get up very early, but she would not nag.

"Forget it," she said. "I'm only a sweet little sorority type who shouldn't be out with you big rough fellows."

He stopped laughing but continued to stare at her.

"All right. Then why don't you tell me to blow?"

She remembered how proud she had been last winter to introduce him to her father and mother when he first came to the house. Now she knew he had been partly drunk even then, but at the time she had had no experience with his drinking. She had not even hesitated when he took her to one of the clubs downtown, the first one she had ever been in. There was no question of her age, and the first drink had thrilled her. She did not think he knew yet that it had been her first drink. It kept her from realizing how drunk he was, until he picked a fight with a sailor for some remark she had not heard. Then he would not take her home, but at least she had had sense enough to stop drinking as he got drunker.

She had been afraid to leave him because she felt responsible for him. Later there was another fight in the men's room, and when he came out he could hardly walk. Someone had helped her get him to the car, and she had driven him home while he denounced her almost as obscenely and incomprehensibly as the army corporal had done that night after the USO dance.

Beecher phoned to apologize the next day, but she had not needed an apology to forgive him. She was fascinated by the man beneath the scars, as if his sorry behavior were another disfigurement like his eye and would have to be faced if she intended to grow up among the wounds of war. Maybe she already loved him, although she had not dared think it. She merely told herself that he needed reorientation, and when he phoned for another date she accepted gladly.

Both her mother and father liked Beecher. For some reason her father did not associate him with servicemen who raised hell on his trains. Maybe it was Beecher's scar, or his social poise when he came to get her, or the fact that he lived in Spokane and was therefore a hometown boy rather than a serviceman—or ex-serviceman. In any case her father never objected to her going out with Beecher, even when she came in very late and he would have hit the ceiling if she had been with anyone else. Her mother called him Poor Beecher, as though the loss of an eye had totally disabled him.

Of course Judy never told her parents where she spent those evenings. During the spring and summer she learned the peculiarities of liquor laws in Idaho and Washington, but no bartender ever questioned her age. And Beecher got drunk time after time. It was a sort of insistent derogation of himself, a deliberate display of his worst nature for her benefit. Once she had cried herself to sleep at the way he eluded her through alcohol. And once she had decided to get drunker than he did to show him how disagreeable it could be, but she had gotten sick before she got well started. It scared him though. Afterward he was more careful, and whenever she ordered a second drink he finished it for her.

Now he called her nearly every day and saw her two or three times a week. Sometimes they went to a movie or stopped somewhere to dance, and often they just sat in the car in front of her house to talk. But he had never mentioned loving her until tonight. He had never given any explanation of why he chose to be with her. He had never even tried to kiss her, and for a long time she had wished he would.

It was a confused yearning. She thought it was a feeling you had for someone who would never care how you felt, and you let it develop because it was bound to vanish as soon as the war was over and all wartime confusion vanished. Beecher needed a friend, and she was his friend. Apparently he respected her on such a basis, and so far that was that. You could not altogether explain contradictory urges and impulses making you tolerate in one person what you would not tolerate in another, but she loved Beecher in spite of herself and longed for a kiss to test the strength of this love.

"Well," she said. "At least you don't get sloppy drunk lately."

"Not while you're around," he said. "But when you aren't with me I can still throw a doozey. I'm no saint, Judy."

"I'd be the last to claim you were."

"Then why put up with me?"

"Because most of your tough stuff's an act."

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, the way you've been rattling on tonight for instance."

"About loving you?"

"Yes, for example."

"It's one thing I did mean."

"I'm sure you didn't." She took a sip of her drink. If he had meant it he should not have chosen a crowded bar to say it for the first time. She drank some more because she disliked the taste and wanted to concentrate on something superficial. "My drink's flat."

"Would you like another?"

"Yes, please."

His good eye watched her steadily. She reached for the lighted cigarette between his fingers. She took a long puff on it to kill the taste of her drink, looking away from him.

"I'll get you home," he said. "Even if you have to drive."

"Of course." She smiled. "But it's a long way, Beecher."

"Let me tell you how much I love you here, so you won't have to fight me off in the car."

She glanced at the next table. If the sailors were listening they were doing it politely, with eyes averted.

"Then order me a double whisky sour to put me in the mood."

Beecher suddenly finished his own drink and stood up.

"You win," he said. "Let's go."

The small-town buildings of Coeur d'Alene were dark and forlorn outside in the warm August night. Sailors strolled by from nowhere to nowhere. The identical mold of their uniforms made her think of identical desires endlessly repeated. Beecher unlocked the car door for her, and she got in to lean across and open his door. He did not glance at her as he slid in. She thought he was angry about leaving or drunker than he admitted, but she was not afraid of his driving. He always drove slowly. As long as he was capable of driving at all he remembered that with one eye he could not judge distance.

But instead of turning toward Spokane Beecher drove out of town away from it, following a highway around the lake toward Kellogg and Wallace. He did not explain why, and she sat in silence beside him as if they were strangers on a bus. Then she began to feel frightened, not of him but of herself. She had no defense against Beecher Neal. Anything he asked she would give. She was supposed to love someone called Andrew Willy, but that had become as unreal as something she had once known about Beecher and Ruby Haig. At the moment nothing mattered except that Beecher had suddenly driven off with her on a lonely road away from town, and if at last he wanted kisses or more she had no will to resist, whatever the consequences.

He turned from the main highway onto a side road and drove down to the edge of Lake Coeur d'Alene. He turned off the motor

and lights, then for a long time sat staring across the steering wheel as if he were still driving. The night was moonless, and hills beyond the lake blocked out the lower stars. Only a faint sheen of light reflected from the water's surface. There was a sound of crickets and frogs and breathing, a soft incubative feeling of summer. Her hands began to tremble in her lap.

"Judy," he said finally. "Right now I'm stone cold sober."

"All right," she said. "I don't doubt it."

"Then please believe me. I do love you."

She wet her lips but could not answer.

"I've been an awful fool about it," he went on, holding the steering wheel in both hands and facing straight ahead. "I thought getting out of service ended my responsibilities. I thought everybody should fall down and worship old Beecher One Eye. I thought I was entitled to spend the rest of my life as I chose, and I chose pretty badly."

He paused as though hoping she might say something, but she did not trust her voice. He began speaking again carefully.

"When I met you at the USO things began to change. I didn't know why. At first I thought I just wanted to make you, like any gyrene with a pretty girl. When I didn't even try that a couple of times I wondered if I was losing my marbles. Then it got so I couldn't have a good time with other girls, and all of a sudden it dawned on me I was in love with you. I didn't want to be, because you were so damned decent, and I'd lost faith in decency. I thought everybody was as rotten inside as I was, and anything good anybody did was for appearance's sake." He put his forehead on the steering wheel. "Judy, please say something. Does this interest you at all?"

"Oh yes," she said. Her voice sounded much too high. "I'm very glad if you've changed your mind."

"Well." He raised his head but still did not look at her. His hands gripped and ungripped the steering wheel, twisting it slightly back and forth. "It just boils down to what I've said. I love you. I've loved you for a long time now, even if I didn't act like it. I thought maybe I'd get over it, but it's getting worse. I can't stand

the days I don't see you. I get sick to my stomach when I hear you talk about joining the BAMs. I can't keep it to myself any more, Judy, so there it is. I love you till it hurts. I'm through being a big tough guy trying to show you how rough I can play. Maybe I never was tough, because all I want is you, on your own terms. For keeps, Judy."

He turned toward her as though he were not sure she would understand, and she could not bear his defenselessness. She threw herself into his arms. Their lips met brutally, as if contact could not be proved without bruises. Her hands clawed at his back as if she wanted to tear through his jacket. Her legs pressed under his fiercely, and her toes curled against the soles of her shoes. She thought she would do anything for him. She thought she had never felt flesh so vital and undeniable. She thought he did not have to love her for keeps—as long as he held back nothing of himself tonight.

He kissed her cheek, her closed eyes, the hollow of her throat, and again her mouth. Even when his lips broke away from hers she could scarcely breathe. She raised her hand to his hair, then drew her fingers across his smooth forehead to the scarred eyebrow.

"Can you love me a little?" he said. It was barely a whisper, yet it was the most heartbreaking thing she had ever heard.

"Yes," she said. "Very much."

"It doesn't have to be much if you're patient till I earn more."

"You can't control feelings, Beecher. I love you now."

"I'm hardly worth it." He rubbed his cheek tightly against hers. "I've played around a lot, and I can't change that. You deserve better, but I'm ready to settle down if you'll have me. I'll go to school this fall, if you'll go with me. I'll do anything to be a good husband for you. We'll never be broke, Judy, and you'll never be ashamed of me because of my bad eye. I'd like to be whole for you, but an eye isn't so important. Will you marry me?"

She tried to stop living. She had not expected so much so soon. She needed time to think yet had never been less able to think. She felt suffocated by her own love and his, by his body in her arms, by

the knowledge that he was the man with a scar who had been so bitter.

"Marry you?" she said in a high thin voice.

"Yes, Judy. Otherwise I couldn't go away to school. I couldn't leave you alone even for a semester. Marry me so we can go together."

In a moment it would be too late. She would remember something, or he would remember something, or they would both discover they were dreaming a large impossible dream. He had come out of himself at last, and if she did not act immediately he would withdraw into his old hurt and be lost forever. He was too good to lose. He loved her, she loved him, and that was enough for happiness in this disjointed world.

"Of course," she said thinly. "If it's what you want, Beecher."

"Oh god, Judy. You'll be proud of me. I promise."

"I'm already proud of you. Kiss me before I cry."

2

It was three minutes after seven the next morning when Judy came on the ward. She hadn't slept a wink all night, but she felt wonderful. Her blue uniform seemed as special as a wedding gown, and she swept down the corridor with a bounce in her step and a smile on her lips.

"Well," Mrs. Amann said. "It's about time."

She was standing beside the ward desk with a medicine tray in one hand and a telegram in the other. She was the nurse in charge, and Judy liked her in spite of her foul temper and bulldog jaw. She wanted to say right then and there that she would have to quit at the end of the month because she was being married in September, but Mrs. Amann's poised impatience discouraged that. The news would keep till the work was done.

"Good morning," Judy said brightly. "Sorry if I'm late."

"At least you're here," Mrs. Amann said. "Palmer's sick again, so I've got medicine to do besides the charts. Two already on the

way down from delivery, and now this damned telegram." She glanced at the envelope, twisted her wrist to see her watch, then scowled at Judy. "Could I trust you with the telegram before you start on carts?"

"I'd be glad to take it," Judy said.

"I doubt that." Mrs. Amann glared at the telegram once more, then held it toward Judy. "It's a death message. A hell of a way to start the day, but I can't do six things at once. Take it to the west corridor bed. Practice your bedside manner. Maybe it won't bother that one."

She slapped the telegram into Judy's hand as though it were a scalpel in surgery, then hurried off down the corridor with her medicine tray.

Judy's smile faded. In maternity she had hoped to avoid death by dealing with its opposite, yet now on this fine morning she was handed death in a telegram. It was so completely out of her realm that for a moment the name on the telegram disturbed her more than its contents. Mrs. Ruby Haig. The telegram had been forwarded from another address, but as soon as Mrs. Amann had mentioned the west corridor bed Judy had felt a drop of acid in her new happiness. Yesterday they had moved Ruby Haig out there to make room in 312 for a patient with stitches and the need for a bed light. Tomorrow Ruby would be discharged, yet today she was an unwelcome reminder of Beecher on the prowl.

She had introduced him to Judy. He had never mentioned her since, but there had certainly been intimacy between them last winter. Judy had gradually ignored it until the morning she went to clean room 312 and saw the familiar hard face and peroxide hair in bed 4. Then in a burn of embarrassment she recalled the night Ruby had dragged her across the dance floor to meet an insolent gyrene who said he would not play second fiddle to a dogface. Bad pennies do turn up.

Even unpainted and between clean white sheets, and later with the baby at her side, Ruby did not look maternal. She looked frankly sensual and somewhat bored. That first morning she had been smoking in bed and blowing smoke toward the ceiling as if

she had not borne a son the night before and were entirely misplaced in a maternity ward.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she had asked Judy.

"Working part time." Judy had forced a modification of the professional smile she used to wear at the USO. "How are you?"

Ruby touched the sheet above her stomach.

"A lot lighter. This how you learn the facts of life?" She stared at Judy with the same pity for her innocence that she had shown at the USO—maybe with greater pity because she seemed to know that innocence was still intact. Judy blushed.

"I hadn't thought of it," she said.

"Must be a good antidote for rassling matches at the club."

One of the other patients in the room snickered.

"I've quit the USO," Judy said.

"Don't blame you." Ruby reached over to put out her cigarette. Her face relaxed slightly, but Judy saw that it was not even brashly pretty any more. It was much too tired to be pretty. "Anyhow its swell of you to keep up the war effort," Ruby said. "Plan to be a nurse?"

"Oh no. Just helping out." Then Judy felt curious and a little conciliatory. "Is this your first, Mrs. Haig?"

"Good god," Ruby said. "It's my third."

They spoke to each other every day afterward, but impersonally. Judy had not told Beecher of seeing Ruby either. It had not been important until this morning, yet now she was suddenly going to marry him and it was suddenly unnerving to be entangled again with a woman so questionably involved in Beecher's past.

As Mrs. Amann dryly pointed out, Ruby had no visitors, no wedding ring, no apparent husband. With so many men in service that proved nothing, but still you wondered. You could not help noticing Ruby's lack of interest in the baby, as if she admitted bringing him into the world but preferred to let it go at that. And yesterday while Judy had been setting up a screen around her bed after it had been moved into the corridor, Ruby said with chilling callousness as the baby nursed, "God help him when he's weaned. He won't always have it on tap."

Judy flicked the telegram against the ward desk and wished she had not volunteered to deliver it. Where did death fit in? She scarcely knew how to handle life, let alone death—even in a message. She wanted to be thinking of Beecher as he had spoken to her in the car last night. She wanted to remember the force of his lips and arms. She would marry him unconditionally, but she wished Ruby Haig had had her baby somewhere else at some other time.

Then Judy started toward the west wing, ashamed of herself. It was selfish to balk at an unpleasant task while so much waited to be done. It was more selfish to consider her own affairs when Ruby Haig might have lost someone as dear to her as the child's father. You gained nothing by poking through old lusts and past mistakes anyway. Everyone had bad moments. You must simply suffer them, correct them, and forget them.

She turned into the west corridor and passed the linen closets and workrooms. A white screen around the bed by the window made it look quarantined, but the ward was always crowded these days. She began to tiptoe, even though her rubber heels were noiseless. If Ruby were asleep maybe the unpleasantness could be postponed for Mrs. Amann.

Ruby was wide awake. She had just finished nursing and sat propped against her pillow with the baby asleep beside her. Her face looked worn and unguarded, as if in private she worried a lot. She had not heard Judy approach, and for a moment Judy stood holding her breath at the edge of the screen. Ordinarily she did not go closer to the babies without a mask, yet this was different. She spoke very softly.

"Good morning, Ruby."

Ruby jumped, then smiled wryly.

"Hi, Judy. You've got ungodly hours, haven't you?"

"At least I'm off early." She stepped forward and held out the telegram, feeling somehow vindictive in offering a thing that could hurt. "It's bad news, I'm afraid. I'm terribly sorry, Ruby."

"Oh lord," Ruby said. "What now?"

She took the envelope and tore it open. She unfolded the mes-

sage and appeared to read it, but nothing happened for so long that you wondered if she could read. Her hand held the paper steadily, and her face did not change. Judy grew nervous and glanced at the baby. His features were so tiny that they were practically nonexistent. She wondered if she should call a nursery girl to pick him up. There were two new girls on, and they might have forgotten him. Poor unwanted thing . . .

"I'll go get the nursery girl," she said, turning away.

"No, wait," Ruby said. "Stay here a minute."

Judy stopped. Ruby was biting her lip but not crying. She only looked inwardly startled, as if she had not yet had a baby but recognized the first pangs of labor. Judy felt sorry for her.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

Ruby shook her head but made no effort to explain further. Should you squeeze her hand, pat her arm, smile bravely? It was very awkward.

"It must be an awful shock," Judy said finally. "Would you like me to see if one of the nurses is free yet?"

"No, please." Ruby's voice was hoarse. You could tell she was suffering. "Just let me get hold of myself. I don't want to cry."

"It might help," Judy said lamely.

"I should've cried long ago if I was ever going to." She dropped the telegram on the sheet and pulled her eyes into oriental elongations as if to blur everything thoroughly before tears had a chance.

"Could I get you some cold water?" Judy asked.

"No, please. Don't leave me alone. I never knew anybody who died before, and I didn't ever expect it to be Jones."

She rubbed her forehead with the base of her hands, pushing her fingers into the coarse hair with dark roots, her eyes still dry. But if only someone named Jones had died, couldn't the shock be talked away?

"Who was Jones?" Judy asked. "A friend of the family?"

"Solomon Jones," Ruby said. "My husband. Killed in action."

Her voice broke in a sort of breathless disbelief. Judy looked quickly out the window at the foot of the bed. She could see the bricks and windows of the east wing opposite. Delivery rooms were

over there, and all at once it seemed hopelessly wrong to be forcing more and more susceptible souls into a warring world. Damage didn't stop at the battlefields. It crippled Beecher and reached Ruby Haig through a husband named Jones. Judy felt tired and baffled and tight-throated.

"I'm awfully sorry," she managed to say.

"For him or me?" Ruby said. "And if you want to be sorrier yet, he wasn't really my husband. We never got around to that."

"The baby's father?" Judy asked helplessly.

"I wish he was." You could not tell whether she resented Judy's clumsy questions or her own grief or spoke harshly out of habit. "But I didn't even spare him that," she said. "He always wanted a son, but I didn't wait for him to do it. He's been overseas two years."

"Oh," Judy said. She did not want to hear any more about it. She wanted to think of something else again, yet now that she had started this talking she could not stop it halfway.

"Oh yes," Ruby said. She stared wide-eyed at Judy but did not appear to see anything outside herself. "He'd been overseas so long I couldn't remember what he was like, but I didn't want him dead. I wanted him to come home even if this kid wasn't his." She doubled her plump hands into fists and hit the sheet. "I wasn't satisfied with two other kids and the tag of common-law wife, see. Oh no. There were too many good-looking doggies and swabbies on the loose for me to keep my nose clean. Live it up and make the boys happy, I thought. You're only young once. I had an allotment and no reputation to ruin, so I could play around all I wanted till Jones came back and got ready to settle down. And everything was dandy till I met the father of this one."

She fought very hard for breath, and Judy wanted to leave.

"Hush," Judy said. "Don't upset yourself any more."

"Oh god." Ruby's voice was jagged with strain now. "What does it matter with Jones dead? He was the only one who counted. The father of this one was quite a guy and I could've fallen for him, but he was smarter than that. He knew what I was worth, and he was so right. I didn't try to hang onto him after I got pregnant,

because having Jones foot the bill made it all the funnier. I wrote and told him I had to have an operation, and I could hardly wait to see the expression on his face when he saw what they took out." She really sobbed then. "Only now he won't come back, and it isn't the least bit funny."

Tears rolled onto her cheeks. She suddenly fell apart inside, and all hardness left her face. She looked dismayed and trite and pitiful, like anyone in trouble. Her hands groped along the sheet as if trying to find something to hold onto.

"Hush now," Judy said. It seemed necessary not to let her wake the baby. He was beginning to fuss, and it seemed imperative to keep him out of this. She touched Ruby's arm. "Don't talk any more."

"Why not?" Ruby's voice rose compulsively. She was not through whipping herself. "Why not blab the whole filthy story to save guesswork? You goody-goody girls might as well know how people get killed while other people aren't even faithful to them. You might as well learn that babies aren't made in delivery rooms. The trouble is you don't expect someone you count on to get killed, and you never expect a baby till you miss a period and start getting sick of a morning. But it happens. Just look how it happens."

"Please," Judy said. "They'll hear you all over the ward."

"Who cares?" Ruby rolled her head back and forth on the pillow as the baby began crying a tiny curious echo of its mother's torment. "Don't I look like a whore? Haven't I acted like one long enough for it to show? I wouldn't have been good enough for Jones if he had come back, but I would've tried. I was ready to call it quits. I was going back to Coeur d'Alene tomorrow and let my hair grow out natural and give Mom a hand with the other kids so Jones wouldn't be too sore when he found an extra one there. I wanted him to come back and see what a common-law wife was, but then I wanted to marry him and make the best of it. I didn't want him to die."

Her words drew into a long spastic sob, then she turned her head sideways to cry freely. Judy felt choked and sick, but she

thought she might save the baby. He was almost purple with tiny wailing, and mask or no mask she was just going to reach for him as Mrs. Amann's competent voice came from behind her.

"What's the matter, Judy?"

She turned and clutched Mrs. Amann's sturdy arm.

"The telegram," she said. "She—Mrs. Haig took it very hard."

"Well, get a nursery girl." Mrs. Amann set the medicine tray on the bedside table. "I'll stay here." She put a calm hand on Ruby's shoulder. "Get it out of your system, honey. There, there."

One of the new girls was already on her way down the corridor as Judy left the screened bed. Judy tried to smile as they passed, but her face felt flaccid. At the ward desk she stopped and held her breath.

What have I done? she thought.

Her happiness had collapsed, and she doubted that she could get through the day without it. But first of all she must try to straighten everything out. She reached for the phone on the desk, then changed her mind. She went quickly down to the phone booths in the lobby, using the stairs rather than face anyone in the elevator. Her hand shook as she dialed his number, and the phone at the other end rang several times before she realized that it was not yet seven-thirty and he would not be up.

But Beecher's mother answered, and Judy apologized for calling so early, then left word for him to pick her up at three. Afterward she hurried back to the ward on the verge of tears yet determined to work her shift as usual, because now she would not be quitting at the end of the month.

3

He was waiting in the lobby when she came down in her street clothes. He had had his hair cut and looked as though he had just shaved and showered and dressed especially for her. He wore a collegiate sport jacket and gray flannel trousers. When he took her hand he grinned almost shyly, without a trace of insolence. It

nearly broke her heart, because he seemed so pleased and she had cheated him so badly.

"Hi," he said. "You look awful sweet, but kinda beat."

"I am." She let her hand hang unresponsively in his as they went outside. The sultry glare of sun was staggering, and tires of passing cars sounded sticky in hot asphalt. "I'm sorry I got your mother out of bed so early."

"She was already up. What's cooking, Judy?"

"Let's go somewhere and talk."

"I don't have the car."

"We can catch a bus. I—I'd like a drink, Beecher."

"Well how about that?" He tightened his hold on her limp hand in amusement, and she wanted to spin into his arms and bury her face on his shoulder. But she did not even trust herself to glance at him.

They went to the club where she had had her first drink. At mid-afternoon it was as dim and cool and hushed as a church. Two WAC lieutenants sat at a corner table, and two ensigns stood at the bar pretending not to see the WACs. The only profane note in the whole place was a subdued clank and whir of the nickel slot machine being played by an elderly civilian sitting on a bar stool in front of it.

Judy went directly to the table farthest from the WACs. Beecher sat opposite her, and they ordered Tom Collinses. Judy drank half of hers before the waiter had torn the scrip from Beecher's club booklet. She wanted to keep drinking until coldness spread all through her, but the taste of gin warned her to stop.

"All right, Judy," Beecher said. "What is it?"

She found no words for an adequate start.

"Play the juke box," she told him. "So nobody can hear."

He crossed the room to put a quarter in the machine. Its volume was turned low, and Judy scarcely heard the music when it began. But the two ensigns, as though they had been waiting for a cue, sat their glasses on the bar and walked over to the WACs' table. They almost bowed formally while asking for a dance. The

two WACs appeared unprepared for the invitation. They rounded their mouths at each other in surprise, then mutually agreed. The two couples moved to a small square of uncarpeted floor near the juke box and joined sedately in dancing.

As Beecher came back to sit down, Judy stared at the straws in her glass and stirred them through chipped ice. She realized now that the song was "Mairzy Doats," and he had picked it to remind her of the times they had laughed at it. This thing was becoming horribly difficult, yet it had to be done. She drew in her breath and spoke quickly.

"First of all, tell me something. The answer won't make any difference in what I have to say, but I'd like to know."

"Okay," he said. "Let's have it."

"Remember Ruby Haig?"

"Yes. Sure."

She hesitated, trying to soften the rude issue somehow.

"Beecher, I love you," she said. She kept her eyes on the circling straws in her glass. "Remember that, before you think anything else." Then she sat perfectly motionless and plunged into it. "Ruby had a baby. Her husband was killed overseas, and he wasn't the father. She must have been pregnant last winter when she introduced us, and I only want to know that you aren't the father of this baby."

He said nothing for so long that she had to look at him. He looked in mortal pain again. He was staring at her as if she had freshly ripped the wound through his eyebrow, and in a moment it would bleed.

"Don't hate me for asking," she said. "I can't marry you anyway, but it's one of those sneaking possibilities that——"

"What is this, Judy?" he said. "What's gotten into you?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't blink it away. I had to take Ruby the death message this morning, and no matter how much she's to blame there's still a second party involved. I just want to know it wasn't you, so I can explain the rest and get it over with."

"Of course it wasn't me." His voice was brittle and positive, and she felt a wave of relief. But he leaned forward angrily, and she

was afraid she would drive him irreparably back into bitterness. "Listen," he said. "Whatever happened between Ruby and me happened before I went overseas, a year before I knew you. I'm not proud of it, but that's the truth. If she made you think I could be the father of her kid, she's more of a bitch than I thought."

"Don't call her names, Beecher."

"But you've got to believe me. I'll admit I was looking for easy pushovers when I came home, and I knew Ruby was one of the easiest. But she had a couple of doggies on the string then, and she'd been at it so hot and heavy while I was gone that she already looked like a two-bit——"

"Please, Beecher. She called herself the dirty names this morning. I don't want to hear any more about it. Just forget it."

"But this is true, Judy."

"I believe you. That's all I wanted to know."

"Then what do you mean about not marrying me?"

"I can't. I simply can't, that's all."

Her voice was going to break, and she shook her head and looked down at her glass to keep from seeing his round hurt left eye and his frowning hurt right eye. He reached over and grabbed her wrist, pulling it toward him as if he could pull her attention with it.

"Listen," he said. "Ruby told you something that got you all riled up, and I won't let her come between us."

"Wait," Judy said. She pulled her wrist free of his hold, as though she had to break physical contact before she could control herself. "Don't blame Ruby. This has nothing to do with her, except that she—she showed me how much I'm like her."

"Oh for god's sake, Judy."

"That's true too, Beecher. Please give me a cigarette before I finish."

She took another sip of her drink while Beecher deftly bounded a single cigarette up in the pack and offered it to her. As she held it to be lighted both their hands trembled. She inhaled and leaned back for a moment to see if alcohol and nicotine were being of any help. She saw the waiter reading a newspaper behind the bar.

The ensigns and WACs continued dancing, making good use of Beecher's quarter. Now the record on the juke box was "I'll Be Seeing You," and Jo Stafford's agonizing wail about old familiar places would have been unbearable if the man at the slot machine had not blurred it with a steady clank and whirl of nickels versus mechanism.

"Don't go on," Beecher said. "You're too upset."

"There's no use postponing it," she said. "I spent the whole day hating myself for the mess I've caused."

"What mess?"

"I promised to marry somebody overseas. I can't let him down."

Beecher sat perfectly still. One of the WACs laughed in the background but discreetly suppressed it. Jo Stafford kept on wailing.

"You must have thought of that before," Beecher said at last.

"I did. I used to think of it every time we went out together, but I decided it made no difference because you'd never fall in love with me. Then last night I couldn't think of anything but loving you and marrying you. Maybe I never would have thought of it again if it hadn't been for Ruby and her telegram. When she went to pieces I realized that even if Andy and I weren't married I had been just as unfaithful to him as Ruby was to her—her man."

"That's ridiculous, Judy."

"It isn't. I don't want to be a—a bitch."

"Stop it. You're not like Ruby in any way."

"I am." She leaned toward him. "Don't you see? It's only a matter of degree. I promised Andy I'd wait. He asked me to marry him before he went overseas, and I wouldn't because I didn't believe we were old enough. But I told him I'd wait, and all I did was forget—just exactly like Ruby Haig."

"People get Dear John letters every day, Judy."

"That doesn't justify it. You've told me how miserable it is out there. I have no right to make myself happy while he's suffering."

"That's like saying you can't be happy till everyone else in the world is. It doesn't work that way."

"But I can't make him more unhappy under the circumstances."

"Do you love him?"

She put her elbow on the table and pressed her forehead into her hand with her eyes closed. She wanted to be completely honest with herself and had to shut out the living presence of Beecher Neal. But all she retained of Andrew Willy was his lifeless pose in the photograph she had destroyed months ago for the express purpose of keeping him alive and valid in her memory. She shook her head in her hand.

"I don't think so," she said. "I don't know him any more, Beecher. It's been nearly two years since I've seen him. He was a nice little high-school kid then. So was I. We used to kiss on my front porch, and he was the only boy I'd ever kissed. He was real nice, but maybe it's what they call puppy love. If he'd stayed around I'd probably have married him—would have been happy with him. But he wanted to do his part, so he joined the marines." She raised her head and looked past Beecher's shoulder. "I'm not going to let him down."

"If he's a gyrene," Beecher said roughly, "you needn't worry. They'll knock your nice little high-school lover into a cocked hat."

"Don't be that way, Beecher."

"Well look at me. I was a cute kid too once, but the Marine Corps is no picnic. Maybe you won't even know your Andy when he gets out. Maybe he won't be half as presentable as I am when he gets back."

"But I've got to wait and see. I've got to give him a chance."

"Maybe he'll get blinded in both eyes."

"Don't, Beecher."

"Maybe he'll get killed."

"Please don't."

"Well that's what you intend to gamble on. That's how it is these days. It's another story though if you don't love me."

"I do love you. That's why it's so hard."

"Then you don't owe this other guy anything."

She pressed her fingers along her temples to hold back tears. The cigarette and drink were not helping, and neither was Beecher. He was merely concerned with his own injured feelings,

and she could not accept his point of view. She ran her fingers through her short feather-cut hair, then reached for her drink and finished it.

Across the room she saw the ensigns and WAC lieutenants sitting down together at the WACs' table. They made her feel even sadder and wiser. Another budding wartime romance—more love for a night or what have you. She set her glass down and felt exhausted from lack of sleep, a day on her feet, and the strain of seeking the right thing.

"Why do people mess up their lives so?" she said.

He suddenly took her hand again as it lay beside her glass. He held it tightly and spoke without sting.

"You haven't messed up your life. We love each other, Judy. It's all that counts. You can't put yourself away in cold storage for the duration. This other thing is over and done with, like the bad girls I horsed around with. The best thing to do is forget it."

"But it isn't the same. Andy wasn't bad. His letters still sound serious and good. I believe he still loves me very much."

"But you said you don't love him."

"Yes, only I can't be cheap and dirty—like Ruby."

"You can't martyr yourself either."

"How do I know what I can do? I've never really been unhappy so I'd know what I can stand. But why should I give in to you the first time I have to decide between my own feelings and what's right?"

"Why shouldn't your own feelings be right?"

"Maybe they are, but I don't know. Everything's so mixed up. Maybe the war wounds people in their minds, like it wounded your eye, even when we aren't in the thick of it. What's honor any more, Beecher? They used to talk about it in school and Sunday School, but I'm not sure what it is now. Maybe Ruby was right to have a baby, anybody's baby, while her husband was getting killed. Maybe I'm the only virgin left in the whole wide world, and everybody's laughing at me. Maybe I should just sleep with you till Andy comes home, then marry him like I promised. Why wouldn't that be all right, Beecher? I'm willing."

"No." His face was pale. "There'll be none of that."

"Why not? Do you really know what's right and wrong?"

"I'm finding out. I fell in love with you because I believed you were right, and now I'm certain of it. Marry me like we planned."

"It's not fair." She squeezed his warm hard hand. "I can't."

"You're trying to carry too much weight," he said. "You're trying to be everything to everybody—the life of the USO, a nurse's aide, a serviceman's sweetheart. Just be a wife to me."

"I'd like to more than anything on earth. But it's got to wait till I can tell Andy decently to his face."

"Look here, Judy." He leaned closer across the table, grim and handsome and stubbornly determined. "I feel for those guys over there. I like you for wanting to give this kid a break. But I've got to live too. I can't sit around watching you sit around waiting for someone you don't even love any more. I love you bigger than I ever thought possible, and I'm not trying to pass a few nights with you regardless of who'll spend his life with you. I never have, because at least I had sense enough from the start to realize you were better than most of us. I love you for what you are, and what you've done, and what you always will be. If this Andy were here I'd do everything in my power to cut him out, and I think I could. I'd prove that anything he could do, I could do better. I'll prove it anyway, so there's no reason to wait. You couldn't put us each in a scales and weigh our separate war efforts. You can't weigh whatever it is that makes love. It's not a matter of good sportsmanship either, Judy—like first come first served. It's something strictly between two people who all at once don't need anyone else around. That's what happened to us, so stop thinking you've cheated when it couldn't be helped. If you honestly and truly love me you have nothing to regret."

"Oh Beecher." He held both her hands now, one on each side of the empty glass in front of her, and she clung to him as though he were pulling her up over a cliff. "I hate hurting him like this."

"You're hurting me by hesitating."

"I hate having lied to him. I promised I'd wait."

"You promised to marry me. Do you want to make that a lie?"

"But he's so far away, with so little to look forward to."

"I have nothing to look forward to if you go back on me."

"You've got a mother and father and nice home. He's an orphan."

"You can't marry all the poor orphans in the world."

"Don't confuse me. He's not a charity case."

"I'm only trying to make you see things clearly."

"How can I see clearly with you here and me loving you so much?"

"That's all you need to see. Marry me as planned, Judy."

"I'm afraid to. I'd always feel guilty."

"Not if you love me half as much as I love you."

She could not bear the insistence of his good eye or the scarred one. She could not bear his troubled face at such close range without being able to touch it. She was physically and emotionally incapable of resisting his appeal another instant, and without turning loose of his left hand she got up quickly and led him to the dance floor. She swung into his arms with her cheek against his and one hand at the back of his neck, knowing she could sacrifice anyone for this man.

"Write him tonight," Beecher said, his lips brushing her ear as they swayed to the music with barely any movement of their feet, not even aware of the tune Beecher's quarter now played. "Make a clean break with him, then you'll still be clean."

"If only it wouldn't hurt him," she whispered.

"Wounds heal, Judy. They really do."

"All right. I'll marry you. Whatever you say, Beecher."

The WAC who had laughed was watching them. They were so tightly together that she felt intrusive being in the same room with them, yet the dark beauty of Judy's face on the verge of tears and the pale scar through Beecher's eyebrow fascinated her. She sat with her drink half raised, hardly feeling the ensign's knee touching hers.

They're lucky, she thought. They know what it really is.

Where now are all your high resolves at last?

chapter 10

1

“Did the captain send for me?” Lt. McGhee asked at the tent entry.

“Oh yes, McGhee,” Captain Bean said. “Come on in.”

Lt. McGhee stepped into the sweltering pyramidal tent set among banana trees. The tent walls were rolled up, but no air circulated through it. Heavy sweat rolled down Captain Bean’s bare chest and back, soaking his khaki pants beneath the belt around his pudgy waist. He was sucking an old pipe and sitting at a desk built of salvaged lumber. Lt. McGhee wondered if he ever moved out of the tent. He always seemed to be there, dispatching runners, calling conferences with his platoon leaders, making notes in a neat black notebook, and giving every appearance of thinking he had his finger firmly on the company’s pulse. He had never seen combat, except for a bit of mopping-up on Tinian before the division returned to Saipan. His men already called him Lard Face.

“Sit down.” The captain indicated an upended ammunition box in the crushed coral of his tent deck. Tents without coral became thick in mud after five minutes of rain, but only officers and NCOs had tents so far.

"Yessir," Lt. McGhee said formally. He had put on a wrinkled khaki shirt, and it was very uncomfortable. All clothing was uncomfortable in Saipan's heat, and after his turn with dengue on top of the shrapnel in his chest he had little spare energy for unnecessary discomforts. But the captain insisted on his men wearing the uniform of the day whether he did or not, and he ignored the unofficial hour of siesta that even the battalion commander allowed after the noon meal.

Lt. McGhee sat down while the captain thumbed through his notebook in search of items pertaining to McGhee's platoon. He marked off several such items with bold pencil strokes, then leaned back in his folding canvas chair and smiled. His eyes were watery and gray. They reminded the lieutenant of small oysters in a stew.

"How's it been going, McGhee?" the captain asked.

"Not very well, sir."

"Men refusing to snap out of it?"

"It's not the men's fault." Lt. McGhee forced himself to remain steely polite. He smoothed the limp fore-and-aft cap on his knee and straightened the ornament. "When will they get tents, Captain?"

"As soon as somebody higher up gets them." The captain's lips nibbled the stem of his pipe like the lips of a horse after oats. "I understand they have tents at Division but no centerpoles."

"Sounds normal."

The captain shrugged and leaned over his notebook.

"What's this about your men using Regimental Weapons' water hole?"

"They have to bathe somewhere."

"Don't you have enough rain barrels to catch wash water?"

"Some of the barrels leak. All of them have a gasoline film."

"Hmmm." The captain flipped pages of his notebook to a blank page and made a new entry. "We'll see Bn-4 about that."

"Look, Captain." Lt. McGhee leaned forward with one arm across the corner of the captain's table. "For a quart of whisky I can get enough pipe from the Seabees to run a line down here from

the reservoir. The only catch is I have to have a truck to pick it up."

The captain sat back and smeared sweat around on his chest.

"No dice," he said. "The colonel's already been chewed out about those army tent flies we're using for a galley. We'd all end up in hack."

Lt. McGhee slumped back onto his box.

"When are we going to get fresh food?" he asked.

"Stick to problems at your own level," the captain said irritably. "That's Division's worry, and they're probably doing the best they can. Now I've got another note here that you aren't meeting your quota on working parties. What seems to be the trouble?"

"Captain," Lt. McGhee said, looking directly into the captain's oyster eyes without a flicker of good will, "every man in my platoon who's still on his feet works eight hours a day in spite of the fact that not one of them is actually in shape for it."

"They can't be coddled, McGhee."

"They don't ask to be coddled. They just want food and shelter."

"They'll get it eventually. But if we let them dope off now we'll never be able to control them when we start training again."

"Captain." A tinge of contempt crept into Lt. McGhee's voice in spite of himself. "In this climate, with inadequate food and rest and recreation, with almost three months of combat behind them, and with every man having dengue or just getting over it, nobody on God's green earth can make those men do more than they're doing now. I'll show you a doctor's chit for every man who doesn't turn out. I could get a doctor's chit for several men who do. Some of them have heat rash so bad they can hardly move their arms. Some of them have fungus till you'd think their toes would drop off. One man's in division hospital with scarlet fever, another with diphtheria, two with tropical ulcers. All of them are anxious to get this lousy camp built, but there are physical limitations to what a man can do."

"Well . . ." The captain appeared to consider this while bend-

ing over his table and running the lead in and out of his automatic pencil. "Bring your roster around so I can check it with you. We might find one or two more able-bodied hands."

"Yessir."

The captain picked up his notebook and found the next item.

"Now here's what I've been getting at," he said. "The colonel's given this company a special detail I thought you'd like to handle. But if you can't muster more men I'll let the second platoon take it."

"What's that, sir?"

"A nice little field problem." The captain grinned as if turning from petty details to a pleasant challenge. "We've been ordered to set up a perimeter defense around an Army radar station on Mount Tapotchau."

"Army?" said Lt. McGhee. "Oh for chrissake."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Can't the effing Army defend its own installations, once the Marine Corps secures the effing island for them?"

"We're also garrison troops, Lieutenant," the captain said. "After all, guard duty is part of our job. Those Japs on Tapotchau haven't gotten the word that the island's secure."

"Yessir," Lt. McGhee said. "But there must be somebody on this rock who hasn't spent the last three months in foxholes."

"We're trained for it. Why should we complain?"

Lt. McGhee stared at the captain and wondered if he even knew where Mount Tapotchau was. But if it was safe enough for an Army installation it was probably safe enough for Captain Bean to visit during the day, by jeep, under the impression that he was functioning boldly in the field. The lieutenant picked up his cap and got ready to rise.

"I'll bring my roster around as soon as I can," he said. "Then I'm sure you'll give this detail to the second platoon."

"One other thing first." The captain glanced at another item in his notebook. "I have a question here about Private Willy."

"What about him?" McGhee asked.

"As I recall, he killed a man on Tinian the day I joined you."

"Yessir. Purely an accident. I thought the matter was closed."

"How can it be closed? Nothing's been done about it yet. We've been too busy moving and establishing camp."

"What could be done about it?" McGhee said.

"I understood Willy was to be court-martialed."

"On what charge, Captain?"

"Oh—manslaughter, I suppose. I haven't consulted Naval Courts and Boards, but since the accidental discharge resulted in death we can't very well get him for merely endangering the lives of others."

"Why 'get him' for anything, Captain?" Lt. McGhee asked very precisely. "The man he killed happened to be his best friend."

"McGhee," the captain said with sudden anger. "I don't believe you understand the importance of discipline at this point."

"Perhaps not," said McGhee.

"Well let me remind you that we'll start training for combat again soon, and if discipline is relaxed now it'll be impossible to keep troops in hand then. You should know that, but there seems to be an attitude among you combat veterans that because I just joined the outfit I'm not experienced enough to handle it. Maybe it's a natural animosity since you liked your former captain, and there's bound to be a difference in our methods. But you can't toss the spit and polish of the Old Corps overboard simply because you spent a few tough weeks in the field. My god, man. This is exactly when troops have to feel a firm hand, so they know they're still marines and not a mob of scavengers. This is exactly when we have to insist on strict military courtesy, regular inspections, regular routine, and above all the letter of the law."

"Yessir," Lt. McGhee said. The captain calmed down.

"I know it's nice to be buddy-buddy with your men," he said. "Sure they call us chicken shit if we insist on saluting and all that. But in the long run buddy-buddy stuff doesn't pay off. Enlisted men respect the officer who keeps them on their toes. I may have drawn staff assignments up to this time, but I've been in the Corps long enough to understand that."

"Yessir."

"Now on this Willy business . . ." The captain shifted his sweating thighs in the chair. "I know they passed the word on Tinian that anybody having an accidental discharge would be court-martialed. Such a warning shouldn't have been necessary, but since a special issue was made of it how do you think the men will feel if Willy gets off scot-free after he's actually killed somebody?"

Lt. McGhee wiped sweat from his eyebrows with his forefinger.

"Captain," he said, "how do you suppose Willy already feels?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Don't you think a man might be punished enough by quite accidentally causing the death of his best friend?"

"But I've been trying to explain," the captain said. "It's not so much a case of punishment as a need for proper discipline."

"Is discipline supposed to break a man's spirit?"

"Why should a court-martial break his spirit?"

"Because he's sick," Lt. McGhee said with irrepressible exasperation. "Because after combat and dengue and that accident he's physically and emotionally exhausted. I keep him working with the other men so he won't brood about what happened, but he's at low ebb. He's taken all he can, and this lousy heat and chow and living in mud aren't helping him get back on his feet. Give the poor kid a break, Captain."

Captain Bean scratched his stomach and sucked his pipe.

"What's he like?" he asked after a contemplative moment.

"One of the best men I've got. Smart, conscientious, BAR man. Only eighteen or nineteen years old, but a veteran of Tarawa too."

"How come he's only a private?"

"Rank isn't the final measure of a man's merit, Captain."

"I know that. But it's a fair indication of his capabilities."

Lt. McGhee hesitated, then admitted the truth.

"He got busted on Hawaii for going AOL."

"I thought so." The captain smiled rather smugly. "There's

nearly always an element of instability in this sort of case. You platoon leaders tend to identify yourselves too closely with your men." He waved objections aside before Lt. McGhee could make them. "Anyhow it's out of my hands since Regiment is expecting disciplinary action. I'll speak to the colonel about it and let you know what he decides."

"Yessir." Lt. McGhee stood up. "Anything else, Captain?"

The captain riffled through his notebook before answering.

"No, I guess not," he said. "But be sure everyone understands that the water hole at Regimental Weapons is off limits, and bring your roster around as soon as you can account for everyone on it."

Lt. McGhee nodded, made an abrupt about-face, and left the tent. He put on his wrinkled cap outside, wished he could get blind drunk, and wondered if he would have the guts to shoot Captain Bean during combat.

2

Shortly after two o'clock the captain put on his last starched khaki shirt and cap, slipped his notebook and pencil into his shirt pocket, and braced himself for direct sunlight. He thought clothing was a necessary protection against the sun, because he had heard that frequent exposure to it might develop skin cancer. He kept his pasty face lowered for maximum shade as he walked up the crushed coral path to the colonel's tent and knocked on the screen door.

Lieutenant Colonel Pary lay stripped to his shorts on the single cot inside. He had a trim athletic body like a good swimmer's, and it was deeply tanned. Besides his cot and air mattress the tent contained a canvas chair and two Valapaks of clothes hung from a stringer. The quarters were screened and elevated on a wooden deck of salvaged lumber, but Captain Bean thought a lieutenant colonel should have also ordered a desk built for himself. He knocked once more.

"Yes, Bean," the colonel said. He sat up. "Come in."

"Was the colonel asleep?" Captain Bean opened the screen door and let in several flies. "I have nothing urgent."

"No, no. Come on in." Colonel Pary sat on the edge of his cot and tried to massage the puffiness of sleep from his face. It was a thoroughbred face, and Captain Bean always thought he had an air about him of polo fields rather than battlefields. They had been transferred here together, and the captain had expected a position on the battalion staff but had been persuaded that line experience would be more valuable to a career officer. They were both career officers with no line experience. "I sort of passed out in this damned heat," the colonel said. "Didn't intend to doze off. What's on your mind, Bean? Sit down."

Captain Bean took off his cap, sat down in the canvas chair, and pulled his notebook and pencil from his pocket.

"I wanted to ask about that Private Willy case," he said.

"What Private Willy case?" Colonel Pary leaned sideways to pour himself a canteen cup of water from the five-gallon can at the foot of his cot. The captain wished he would slip on his trousers.

"He killed a man on Tinian the day we came," said Captain Bean.

"Oh yes." The colonel drank a whole cupful of water without pausing, then set the cup down. "Accidental discharge. What about it?"

"My understanding was that he would be court-martialed as soon as we were settled. I figured we ought to get it out of the way before we start intensive training again."

"It doesn't jell though." The colonel rubbed his cleft chin and stared for a moment at a small lizard hanging motionless to the outside of the screen. "His buddy was reported killed in action."

"Oh?" Captain Bean widened his gray eyes. He did not doubt Colonel Pary's statement, because the colonel had an amazing memory for detail even though he never wrote anything down. But facts had to be facts, and this was highly irregular. "Bit of falsification, wasn't it?"

"Apparently the thing couldn't be helped, and they wanted to

spare the family. Doc Frechette was ordered to handle it that way."

"Well." Captain Bean also stared at the lizard on the screen, his cheeks flushing. "Puts us in a spot, doesn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Discipline, Colonel. These combat outfits get sloppy as hell after a campaign, and I hoped a court would snap the men back."

"Bob King's got a deck court coming up. Won't that do it?"

"Accidental discharge?"

"Yes. One of his men on guard the other night."

"But he didn't hurt anyone, Colonel. This Willy killed a man."

The colonel crossed his legs and seemed mildly annoyed.

"It isn't very consistent, is it?"

"Not when you consider Willy's past record."

"What's in his book?"

"AOL on Hawaii. Unstable type. Couldn't even live up to a pfc rating. McGhee says he's been something of a troublemaker all along."

"I didn't know that." The colonel rubbed his bare shin and studied the hair on it. "Good thing you called it to my attention, Bean. Maybe we'd better run him up with King's man after all."

"Yessir." Captain Bean made a notation. "Manslaughter?"

"Oh—hardly. Since the KIA report's already gone in, we'd better stick to negligence. A deck court ought to do the trick without running into a lot of explanation."

"Yessir." The captain made another note, then tapped the pencil against his teeth. "Too bad we had to pick this up in the middle."

"It'll serve your purpose anyway." The colonel stood up and stretched. "Drop by the Bn-1 tent and have the adjutant fix up a specification appointing you as deck court officer. We'll run these two through and see how things shape up." He reached for the folded dungarees he had been using as a pillow. "I feel sticky as hell. Want to try Regimental Weapons for a shower before it gets crowded?"

"No thanks, Colonel. I've scheduled a platoon leaders' meeting." Captain Bean went to the door. "Any idea when we'll get running water?"

"Not soon enough, I'm afraid. Unless you know somebody in Seabees we could dicker with for a load of pipe."

The captain was very disappointed. He respected the tedious chain of supply and command and resented anyone's effort to circumvent it.

"Nosir," he said. "Pipe seems to be mighty scarce."

"Let me know if you get wind of any. Thanks for stopping by."

3

"But Mr. McGhee," said Private Willy. He wiped sweat from his eyes and blinked at his superior. "What do they think I am? I couldn't help what happened. Salty just threw his rifle and——"

"I know, Willy." They were sitting on the lieutenant's cot in his sagging unscreened tent, and Mr. McGhee was so ashamed of the situation that he wanted to dig out the quart of whisky he had saved for water pipe and split it fifty-fifty right then and there. He had not even told Willy what the captain planned until the deck court form was ready to be signed. He had hoped the matter might somehow be forgotten, but now he only wished he could make the poor kid realize how inevitable it was. "This is primarily a technicality," he said. "It has something to do with tying up loose ends and reminding everyone that accidents aren't allowed. Just read the specification and see if you agree."

He pointed to a typed paragraph on the printed form. Private Willy gingerly took the clean paper between his sweaty fingers and labored through the tangle of language specifying a charge against him.

In that Andrew Willy, while so serving with the Fourth Battalion, Second Marines, Second Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, In the Field, and while present in the bivouac area of said battalion, said bivouac area at said time having about fifty persons present within the immediate vicinity of said Willy, having in his possession a loaded thirty caliber rifle, M-1, and it being his duty to handle said rifle with due caution and circumspection, did, on or about August 6, 1944, in said bivouac area, neglect

and fail to handle said rifle with due caution and circumspection in that he, the said Willy, did fire and cause to be fired a shot from said rifle, and did, therein and thereby, then and there, endanger the lives of the persons present in said bivouac area.

It had happened a month ago—not very long, yet painfully long. Over and over and over, day and night, he had told himself that it was not his fault. It was not Salty's fault. It was just one of those incredible things. Gradually he had almost convinced himself, but now he felt overwhelmed again with guilt, as if Salty's dying eyes stared at him once more in dismay at being deprived of the return to his daughters and unmarried wife.

"But, Lieutenant," he said, his voice going shrill.

"Look, Willy." Lt. McGhee took the neat little court form and laid it on the bunk between them. "Remember this. I believe you. I don't think the accident was your fault. I'm only carrying out orders."

"Yes, Lieutenant. But why——"

"Listen to me, Willy." Lt. McGhee wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake the hurt right out of those wide blue eyes. He wanted to tear up the court form and make somebody eat it. He wanted to shove Captain Bean's pasty face into a cistern of Saipan night soil, but he spoke very distinctly and very patiently in an effort to reach Willy through reason. "You have to remember that no one actually saw the accident. No witness could swear to any more than that you had the rifle in your possession afterward, and it had been discharged, and that's really all you're being tried for."

Willy took a deep uneven breath. His hands were clenched on his knees. If he cries, thought Lt. McGhee, I'll disembowel myself.

"All right," Willy said. "But why can't they leave me alone?"

"Because accidental discharges are commonly punished. They especially passed the word about it on Tinian. They believed your story or they wouldn't have reported Jones killed in action, but the fact remains that there was an accidental discharge and it has to be accounted for on up the line." The lieutenant wiped sweat from his eyebrows, then wiped his hands on his pants. He was so tired he

ached. He was infinitely tired of the heat and filth and constant exertion of getting from day to miserable day, but he had to offer something to someone who was worse off. "I honestly don't understand this any more than you do. It isn't justice, but maybe it's proper military discipline. That's what they tell me, and that's what we're up against. We don't have trained lawyers and judges out here, so we stumble along like we're ordered. If I was a lawyer maybe I could fight the thing for you, but I'm not. As near as I can figure out your best bet is to take it as they say."

"But it wasn't even my rifle, Lieutenant."

"I know it wasn't. Everyone knows it. But you didn't handle the damned thing with due caution and circumspection when it was flung at your head. You fired it and caused it to be fired, or whatever this charge says. God, Willy. Don't argue with me. I'm on your side."

"All right, Mr. McGhee. But——"

"Look. I knew a kid who accidentally shot his own finger off. He got court-martialed as soon as he was out of the hospital, and they tried to prove he had done it deliberately."

"But I'd rather have shot my own finger off," Willy said. "I'd rather be dead than have Salty dead. He was my friend."

Lt. McGhee closed his eyes and wondered how little it would take at this point to drive a man to suicide. He became very patient again.

"I believe that too," he said. "But let's stick to the way it is. If you refuse a deck court, as you have every right to do, they'll give you a summary court. Maybe a general court, because they've committed themselves on it now. They'd dig up a manslaughter charge, and it'd only go harder on you. Sign this, Willy. Take it like a man. You've taken it fine so far, and they can't do much to you on a deck court."

Private Willy rubbed his hands on his knees and swallowed dryly.

"All right," he said. "Whatever you say."

"Plead guilty and get it over with. They'll let you alone then."

Lt. McGhee slipped a message book from his map case and laid the court form across it to make a writing surface. He handed them

to Willy with his fountain pen, and where the form said, "I consent to trial by Deck Court as above:" Private Willy slowly wrote his name.

"Fine." Lt. McGhee took back the message book and pen as if they had grown very heavy. "Now report yourself to the first sergeant."

Private Willy stood up, holding the court form by one corner.

"Should I put on khaki or something?" he asked.

"Hell no. Tell the captain you lost your sea bag. Tell him I said to wear dungarees. Show him just how foul the living is down here."

"Yessir." He squared his shoulders a bit. "Thanks, Lieutenant."

As soon as Willy left the tent, Lt. McGhee decided he had to have a drink or lose his mind. He took the quart of whisky from a box under his sack, then suddenly went to the tent entrance with it.

"Willy," he called to the shabby little figure climbing the hill toward the headquarters area. Private Willy stopped and turned. "Tell me something. You didn't believe in God the night after Tarawa. How do you feel about it now?"

Private Willy stood in the hot sun and squinted seaward.

"What does it matter?" he said. "That wouldn't change anything."

"It's just that I'm beginning to agree with you." Lt. McGhee held up the bottle. "Anyway, report back here when you get through."

4

At sunset that evening Private Willy sat by himself beside the hole he slept in. A lean-to of corrugated sheet tin and his shelter half covered it and kept it fairly dry during rains. He had not yet put on his shirt, as you had to do when mosquitoes came out. Neither had the men shooting craps on his right, nor the three men on his left who were discussing the end of the war—"the Golden Gate in forty-eight." You never wore a shirt unless it was mandatory.

Canefields swept down the long hillside to cliffs above the ocean, and endless water stretched eastward like stagnant time. He could see a few tents in lower bivouac areas, and toward Magicienne Bay a fighter strip had already been built. He watched a formation of planes land one by one, then wondered how it would feel to be a Jap hidden in the hills waiting for the Imperial Navy to recapture the island. Probably something like Andrew Willy waiting for Salty Jones to reappear.

It had not been so much loneliness he felt as an inclination to be alone, which you never were in a military outfit. His platoon mates had been considerate yet reminded him of the accident by that very consideration. They were falsely cheerful in his presence or unnecessarily helpful, and it intruded on his need to work things out for himself. He would have liked to feel undetected in sorrow and shame and gnawing guilt, but one way or another they all showed awareness of it. Every hot day and every hot night he quivered inwardly at the whole wretched business, and now a lard-faced captain had probed into the unhealed wound. You cannot grieve forever without going crazy, but neither can you forget a sore that keeps being torn open.

Lt. McGhee's shot of whisky had already sweated out of him with no remaining uplift. The lieutenant had been nice to offer it, but nothing erased that oblique sense of guilt. As he sat there remembering the trial and the real event, he heard a familiar voice speak to the crap shooters. He turned in surprise.

"Leeper," he said, then thought oh hell. Now he'll have to know.

Leeper looked around with an expression of shameless pleasure. He dropped his gear beside the other men and hurried to Willy.

"Andy," he said. "God, it's good to see you." He shook Willy's hand as though they had been separated for years, and Willy was shocked by the change in Leeper. All cockiness was gone. He appeared meek to the point of timidity, dependent to the point of servility. He seemed to look at you with naked hunger for affection, as if a harsh word would make him cringe. No shadow of the Spokane Leeper or New Zealand Leeper remained, and

Willy could not even smile. He tried to free his hand, but Leeper held onto it as if it were security.

"Thank God you made it," Leeper said.

"Yeah." Willy remembered the whang of grenades in the night that had set Leeper to crying and beating his forehead. "Where've you been, Bony? What happened to you that night up by Marpi?"

Leeper did turn loose of his hand then. He sat down and traced an aimless pattern in the dust with his fingertips.

"I cracked up, Andy," he said. "It's all blank after the grenade you threw. In the hospital they said it was shell shock, and they couldn't do anything except put me to work as an orderly." He raised his eyes to Willy's dog tags. "But I'm all right now."

"That's good," Willy said, but he knew it was not true. He knew he would have Leeper around his neck now on top of everything else. "How come they didn't evacuate you?"

"Oh, you don't get evacuated unless you lose both legs."

"Well." Willy hit his knee with his fist and got ready to tell it. "We're a pair of fouled-up marines, Bony. Two sad sacks."

"Why? You've always done good."

"I've done fine. I killed Salty Jones while you were gone."

His voice did not shake. He made it sound pretty rugged, but Leeper stared at him in the strangest way. He seemed to recognize a fellow sufferer and not care anything about the cause of suffering. He put his hand on Willy's shoulder and spoke very sincerely.

"Gosh I'm sorry. But it wasn't your fault, was it?"

"No." He shook Leeper's hand from his shoulder in sudden anger. Sympathy and understanding were wrong. They were a softness to be avoided at any cost. Maybe it was too late to be a good marine, but you had to keep up a front. Out here the code of manliness forbade any sign of emotion other than hate or resentment. Leeper's violation of the code was intolerable. "It was the fickle finger of fate," Willy said. "Salty tossed me his rifle, and it went off. It was only an accident, but today the sonsabitches gave me a deck court."

"Oh, Andy. That's chicken."

"That's the way it is. Now forget it."

They sat in silence for a moment, both watching the land darken as the sun went down behind them. Then Leeper began to glance around uneasily.

"I thought there'd be tents," he said. "Everyone else on the island has tents. Some even have Quonset huts."

"This is the Marine Corps," Willy said. "We do it the hard way."

"Do Japs still bother you? Do we need holes?"

"Once in a while." He knew Bony was scared of coming darkness, but he was too tired to help him dig in. He was far too tired to look after anyone except himself, yet Leeper had to be someone's responsibility. "You might as well use my hole tonight. It's big enough for two."

"That'd be swell, Andy. Thanks a million."

Leeper went to get his gear, and when he came back he gave Willy some pogeys he had brought from the hospital. Then he fussed around inside the shelter, spreading his poncho and hiding from Japs.

"By the way," he said at the entry. "What sentence did you get?"

"They haven't read me off yet," Willy said harshly. "But what difference does it make? They could hang me and it wouldn't bring Salty back. Forget it, Bony. Just for chrissake forget it."

5

The next morning the battalion adjutant picked up the approved deck court form at the colonel's tent. He read it on the way back to his office with some other papers, then took it over to sick bay to get the doctor's signature on the sentence.

Doc Frechette was still daubing lotions on fungus infections, but his junior medical officer and corpsmen were also at work and the sick-call line had shrunk to a few stragglers. As soon as Frechette saw the flabby-faced adjutant he laid his swab aside and jerked his head toward a screened area at the rear of the tent that he called his surgery. The adjutant followed him in out of the

flies. They sat down on a bare cot, both shirtless and sweating. The adjutant bore the heat and common weariness with an air of sophisticated ennui, treating everyone alike with controlled exasperation. He offered the deck court form to the doctor, and Frechette dropped it between them on the cot.

"Are you trying to get evacuated again?" he said.

"You're damn right. I got shooting pains in my head."

"Shoot back at 'em," Frechette told him. They both chuckled.

"Oh, you're a card, Doc," the adjutant said.

"I know, mate. And speaking of pains in the head or elsewhere, did you know they sent Leeper back?"

"Sure. A whole flock of goldbricks returned to duty."

"But I specifically wrote him up for evacuation. Those rear-echelon bastards get so damned officious. He'll be on sick call from now on."

"Tough, Doc. Awful tough."

"Okay. I'll send him to you the first time he shows up."

"Now wait a minute. I've got enough trouble with muster rolls."

"But he's no good for line. Aren't you classification officer?"

"Laughingly so-called."

"Well at least transfer him to Bn-4 or headquarters company. Anything so he won't feel persecuted about going into combat again."

"Keerist, man. Be reasonable. If I transferred everybody to Bn-4 that wants to be in Bn-4, we wouldn't have a single man left in the line. If he's psycho, you take care of him."

"Buddy."

"Sure, Doc. Now sign this so I can go do my vital paper work." He picked up the form and laid it on the doctor's knee.

"What is it?" Frechette asked without looking at it.

"A deck court, Doctor." The adjutant explained as though talking to a feeble-minded child. "It requires your signature right there."

"What poor devil are they browbeating now?"

"Never mind. Just sign the damned thing."

"Why do I have to sign?"

The adjutant closed his eyes and recited his piece patiently.

"Section five-nineteen of Naval Courts and Boards requires that a sentence of piss and punk be approved by the senior medical officer under the immediate jurisdiction of the convening authority." He pointed his forefinger at the doctor's navel. "That's you."

Doc Frechette had only been senior medical officer of the battalion during combat. He was not familiar with administrative procedure but was conscientious about learning. He tried to read some of the tangled language in the specification. He bogged down and reread the name.

"Who's this Andrew Willy?" he asked.

"A kid who shot another kid on Tinian," the adjutant said.

"Oh for chrissake." Doc Frechette straightened up with real interest. "I know him. A nice little guy—all cut up over what happened. I gave him a sedative that night afterwards."

"So what?"

"So they can't do this to him."

"They've done it," said the adjutant. "Just sign the gizmo."

"But the guy he kilied was reported KIA. I did it myself."

"Yes, Doctor." The adjutant nodded with a trace of amusement at the doctor's excitement. "Don't get your bowels in an uproar. That was to spare his family unnecessary bitterness, but it didn't absolve Andrew Willy from his accidental discharge."

"But dammit, why make a criminal of him? The whole thing was an accident involving no carelessness or negligence whatsoever."

"Did you see the shooting?" the adjutant asked.

"No."

"There you are." The adjutant turned his hands palms up. "No witnesses. Willy pleaded guilty. Sign the proceedings, please."

Doc Frechette studied the form again, this time reading the sentence in Captain Bean's handwriting. Then he realized what piss and punk meant.

Thirty days solitary confinement on bread and water.

He tossed the strip of paper toward the adjutant.

"My god," he said. "I'm not about to sign that."

"Take it easy, Doc." The adjutant retrieved the court form and held it carefully by one corner. "Of course you're going to sign it. The colonel's already approved it. After all, you're only a j.g."

"But what kind of nonsense is that—bread and water? Go tell old turd-bird Bean this isn't the Revolutionary War."

The adjutant was enjoying the doctor's indignation.

"Piss and punk is a very old naval tradition, Doctor. As a Navy officer you should be aware of it, and there's no use getting your water hot. Just sign, please."

"I'm not going to sign." Doc Frechette was enjoying himself too, but his indignation was genuine. "Bean might think he's Captain Bligh of the *Bounty*, but as senior medical officer present I refuse to be a party to such a half-baked sentence—colonel or no colonel."

"Do you want to get yourself in hack?"

"I'd love ten days in my sack."

"Amen." They both laughed.

"But seriously," the doctor said, "are they trying to make a mental case of this kid? Thirty days in solitary confinement, brooding about this mess, would ruin him. And god knows the rations he's had for the past three months haven't been much better than bread and water. He needs all the nourishment he can get in this climate after what he's been through. I'll turn in my buttons before I approve undermining his health any further with this piss and punk crud."

The adjutant looked interested

"Do you mean," he said, "you'll actually disapprove the sentence on professional grounds—solely for medical reasons?"

"Certainly I mean that."

"May I quote you to Colonel Pary?"

"Quote me to the general if you want."

"Well, say." The adjutant stood up. his flabby face delighted. "This kind of battle I appreciate—principle versus rank. Doc, I didn't realize anyone still had the guts to have any opinion except

what he was told to. I'll send Willy right over for an examination."

"I don't need to examine the kid. We all eat the same crap. Look." Frechette stretched out two handfuls of loose skin from around his waist. The adjutant laughed, then became workman-like again.

"Examine him anyway," he said. "If we do everything by the book the colonel won't have a leg to stand on."

"Okay." Frechette shrugged. "I'd like to talk to the kid."

"And you'll stick to your guns when they apply the pressure?"

"Hell yes. It's no joke as far as I'm concerned. You tell the colonel, and I quote"—he reached for the court form and read the passage as he would have filled it out—"that 'Having examined accused and place of his confinement, I am of opinion that execution of sentence would *indeed* produce serious injury to his health. Signed, Michael R. Frechette, Medical Corps, USNR.'"

The adjutant took the form and bowed from the waist.

"Doctor, I thank you for Saipan's one inspiring moment."

6

"Bean," said the colonel as he entered the captain's tent unannounced and the captain scrambled to his feet, "you've put me on a spot."

Captain Bean took the pipe from his mouth and widened his oyster-gray eyes. The colonel was wearing starched khaki and carrying a swagger stick. More than ever he appeared ready for the polo field.

"How's that, sir?" Bean asked.

"This Willy case." Colonel Pary tossed the incomplete court form onto the table. "The doctor refuses to approve piss and punk."

Captain Bean looked as if he had been slapped.

"But, Colonel," he said, "I've never heard of such a thing."

"I haven't either. It's always been a customary punishment in the Corps, but apparently the New Navy doesn't see it that way.

I've signed this thing, but it has to have the doctor's approval as well."

"Which doctor? Frechette?"

"Yes." The colonel shifted his swagger stick irritably. "I've checked Naval Courts and Boards, Bean. It has to be the senior medical officer under the immediate jurisdiction of the convening authority. Otherwise I'd get the regimental surgeon to approve it."

Colonel Pary prowled around the captain's table as though he were too agitated to mind the sapping heat. The captain recovered himself enough to scoot his canvas chair forward for the colonel's convenience.

"Sit down," he said.

"I haven't time. I've got an inspection to make."

"But, Colonel." Bean glanced at the court form. "Can't Frechette see that your approval makes his obligatory? It's insubordination."

"Don't be an ass." Colonel Pary did sit down in the canvas chair, slapping his swagger stick across his palm. "I've talked to him. He doesn't consider himself a Navy man before he's a doctor. His professional opinion is that such a sentence in this climate at this time would injure the man's health. I can't order him to change a medical opinion." He stared at Bean with distaste. "It seems to me you could have considered the civilian element when you passed that sentence."

Captain Bean stood beside his table with the unlit pipe held just beyond his lips. He was quite stunned by Frechette's effrontery in disputing the legal sentence of a captain already approved by a colonel.

"But, Colonel," he said, "why don't you bring pressure to bear in some way. He can't be allowed to get away with this."

"I'd look fine," the colonel said, "threatening to put him in hack for something like that." He snorted and wiped sweat from his tanned face. "Besides, I called the regimental CO and found they haven't built a brig yet. You might have considered that, too. Also, the CO was unhappy because you'd given such a severe sentence. He said that since there is clearly doubt as to the man's negligence, and since the lad has an excellent combat record, you

should have been more lenient. And McGhee tells me the man never was a troublemaker, except for his one escapade on Hawaii. I'd say you bitched up the case pretty thoroughly."

Captain Bean's face had become a sunburned pink.

"Yessir," he said.

"The best way to get us off the hook is to change the sentence."

Captain Bean swelled with resentment.

"In order to write a new sentence," he said, "we'd have to get another court form signed. Willy could refuse to do that."

"See that he doesn't refuse." The colonel's swagger stick slapped his palm smartly. "It's either that or throw out the court altogether."

"Yessir," said Captain Bean. "But——"

"No buts about it, Bean." The colonel stood up abruptly. "Take a good hard look at your Naval Courts and Boards and bring me a sentence that no one can disapprove on any grounds whatsoever. This was all your idea in the first place, and I want it cleaned up pronto."

"Yessir," Captain Bean said as the colonel hurried out of the tent.

7

Once more Private Willy sat on the lieutenant's cot and had a shot of whisky before taking the clean new court form he was supposed to sign.

"What the hell's going on, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Damned if I know." Lt. McGhee set the empty whisky bottle out of sight. "Seems they fouled up the other form and had to have a new one."

"But they won't try me all over again, will they?"

"If they start to, just refuse."

"It's driving me batty. Why did the doctor want to see me?"

"I didn't know he had."

"He called me off a working party yesterday and said I had to be examined for the deck court." Private Willy's left leg began to

beat up and down in nervous rhythm. He tried to stop it, but it started again as soon as his attention shifted. "He talked about this and that, where I spent my childhood and what I planned to do after the war. What's it to him, Lieutenant, unless he wants to make out I'm nuts?"

"I don't know, Willy." Lt. McGhee could not help smiling. "I've lost all track of sense in this case. Captain Bean only said they had to retype the form, and he seemed pissed-off about it himself."

"Well I don't like it," Willy said. He had reached the point where he had to talk it out or bust. The lieutenant's whisky gave him enough impetus to go on. "I don't know whether I have any rights or not, but I pleaded guilty like you told me. I'm ready to take whatever they give me if they'll only get it over with. But all this fooling around makes me hate myself more and more. I can't forget the thing as long as they keep this up, and I can't stand much more of it."

"I realize that, Willy," the lieutenant said. "But——"

"Why don't they just send me to Mare Island if that's what I deserve?" It was easier to get it out of his system here than down in the canefields with Leeper's maudlin sympathy. "If they want to make a criminal out of me, why don't they do it and quit piddling around? Maybe I am a criminal for—for what happened to Salty, but I wish they'd stop running me ragged with all this red tape. A man likes to do right and take what he deserves, but he's got feelings, Mr. McGhee." He swallowed hard and rubbed his knees. "Do they think we're just animals, Lieutenant? Look how they don't give us tents or decent chow. Look how they sent Leeper back when he should've gone stateside. He's no good in the field any more, but they won't turn loose of him. He'll crack up again sure as hell, and so will I if this keeps on. What are they trying to do to us?"

The lieutenant leaned forward with a frown.

"Don't let it get you, Willy."

"But I can't help it." He doubled his fists. "You don't know how miserable it is down there in that foxhole night after night. Half the

time I can't sleep, then I try to figure it out all over. How would Salty feel about what happened? Does he blame me? Was it really and truly my fault he got shot?" Willy fought to keep his voice steady. "I liked Salty, Lieutenant. I never liked anyone better in my life. He was nicer to me than my own brothers, and I wanted to be as good a marine as he was—even if he had fouled up his personal life. He didn't want to die, Lieutenant. He had everything to live for. He wanted to go home to his wife and straighten things out. He had a kid he'd never seen, like you. But then he threw that damned rifle, and I don't know who he'd blame for causing it to be fired—me or himself or God or what. It's a terrible question, and now this lousy court-martial stirs it all up again. I feel like a criminal whether I am or not. It's gotten so I'm afraid to touch a weapon because I might unconsciously do it again. But if I have to go on living out here and sleeping with myself in a foxhole every night, I've got to know where I stand." His knee began to bounce up and down. "I've got to know whether the doctor was measuring me for a strait jacket, whether I carelessly endanger the lives of everybody in the platoon, whether I'm even fit to associate with ordinary people. Right now I'm like Leeper—I don't know whether to spit or go blind. He lies there wondering if Japs are coming to get him, and I lie there wishing they would, get me. I'd rather be dead than go on like this."

The lower lids of his bright blue eyes were drawn up as though against a glare of outdoor sun. His unbuttoned dungaree blouse hung around him like a grimy loose skin, as if he had shrunk several sizes and should be stripped of ragged excesses and allowed a clean new start.

The lieutenant sat very still and spoke very softly.

"Don't give up, kid," he said. "You're not crazy. You're no criminal. You're fouled up, but so is everything else. This business is no more your fault than the war is. Salty was killed in action as much as they said he was, and you've got to believe it. Physical details of death in battle don't matter. They're all ugly deaths out

here, and the war killed Salty as sure as if he'd been hit in a barrage."

"That's easy to say, Lieutenant."

"It's true, Willy. Believe me. And if it doesn't make sense to you about Leeper being kept here or the run-around you get with this deck court or the whole Marine Corps, just remember that things don't go smooth in war—nothing. It's mostly an amateur affair after all. People get called in to do jobs too big for them, and if they make mistakes remember they're only human too. They try to run law courts when they're not lawyers. They forget to bring tentpoles because there are so damned many things to bring. It's all a mess, but somehow it functions. We are getting closer to Japan and the day it'll be over so we can live normally again. But remember that normal living gets fouled up too—like you mentioned about Salty. The world never has been perfect. Just bear with it even if you don't understand it, because none of us understand everything in spite of fancy acts we put on. If you're getting the dirty end of the stick now, maybe it won't always be like that. Keep your chin up a while longer, Willy."

They both sat with flies circling around them and heat soaking in relentlessly. Willy knew it was only talk, but his breathing had slowed down a bit and his leg had stopped jittering.

"All right," he said. "I'm all right, Lieutenant."

"I hope so. But let me know any time it gets too rough."

"I'll be all right." He began to feel stony again, as he did when Leeper sympathized with him. "Let's go ahead with it."

Lt. McGhee picked up the court form and pulled a message book from his map case. Once more he handed them to Willy with a fountain pen.

"Okay," he said. "Sign there and keep your fingers crossed."

8

In the evenings then Private Willy worked out a sixty-day sentence of extra police duty. The added hour of work each day did not

botner him as much as the humiliation of paying so cheaply for Salty's death, yet he was glad to get away from Leeper's clinging dependence and his other platoon mates. He worked in headquarters area, clearing taro patches for new tents, and the battalion police sergeant sat by on his haunches to keep him company.

"Don't wear yourself out," he told Willy. He was mild and ineffectual and deadly serious. "But the mail orderly said he'd hold out our mail if I'd do his spot first. We got a potful of mail today, and I gave him your name too. Man, it's a long time sometimes between sugar reports. It helps to have pull now and then, but the worst of this job is too many chiefs and not enough Indians. If it ain't one officer it's another with some top priority plan. First thing you know it's six deals cookin' at once. Now yesterday——"

You did not have to pay close attention to the sergeant's chatter, and Willy raked slowly without hearing more than the gist of a running complaint about constantly countermanded orders. He gathered that even officers were subject to conflict and error, and it was slightly consoling to know that everyone was a little weaker than insignia and outward appearances would have you think.

"Hup!" the sergeant suddenly broke off. Willy pulled his rake up alongside him like a rifle and stood at attention. Colonel Pary was approaching briskly, as though the eternal heat were forbidden to affect anyone of his rank. He exchanged salutes with the police sergeant, said he wanted to check sandbagging progress at the new amphitheater, and hurried away with the sergeant following at an obedient trot.

When they had gone Willy relaxed on his rake to rest a moment. He tired easily these days. Everyone did, and often in mid-work you paused to collect yourself and stare at nothing in particular. Here in the headquarters area banana trees and scarred palms were what you saw. Dark green banana fronds looked cool and juicy, but they were not cool to touch. Nothing was ever cool here, and lopsided clusters of green bananas growing upside down on some of the trees reminded Willy of weird bo-

tanical tumors. He thought how far he had come from the sensible pines of Idaho's Lake Pend Oreille, and he felt lost.

He hated this island. He hated its terrible vegetative fecundity, its surrounding sea, its battle scars. Yet actually things had improved. There were tents and cots now for everyone, although only officers had plywood tent decks. Flies and mosquitoes were dying off under a spray of DDT from low-flying planes. Sea bags had arrived from Tanapag Harbor, and occasionally you wore clean clothing. A few minutes daily there was a trickle of water for a sort of shower, and once in a great while there was fresh meat at the improved galleys. Electric generators were promised soon for general lighting, and already movies were shown if the emergency generator worked and air raids did not interfere.

Air raids were the single worst feature of the island now. They were aimed at the big airfield down where Aslito had been, or at Tinian, but Condition Red invariably brought to mind Salty's old fear of planes. Willy had inherited that fear. During a raid, with prolonged reverberations coming from bombs falling near Aslito, he always remembered how Salty had said that nothing gave you a more helpless feeling than to see tons of disabled machinery fall straight at you from the sky. In the darkness something seemed bound to be falling on you from all those AA bursts, and Willy waited tensely, wondering why he still feared dying.

But at least there were no close-order drills or obstacle courses or firing ranges yet. Most days were spent in hacking a livable camp from canefields and moving coral from pits further up the hill to spread on paths and roads and tent decks. Without crushed coral, jeeps and living quarters were nearly swallowed in mud after each sudden downpour of rain that came without fully obscuring the sun and ended before you could get a poncho. Building camp was better anyway than training incessantly for another cycle of invasion and occupation and utter wretchedness.

Private Willy began to rake again, doubting that he would ever shake off the lethargy and degradation of Saipan to return to normal life. He raked automatically, not because he was afraid of

displeasing the police sergeant by doing too little but simply because it was supposed to atone for a thing that haunted him. When he glanced up a few minutes later he saw a detail of men marching in from the main road past sick bay toward the adjutant's tent. He paused to watch them, diverted by their movement and appearance.

They were new men. You could tell it as easily as if they wore dress blues instead of khaki. They were cleaner than anyone who had been on the island for any length of time. They walked more forcibly than island veterans could have done. They looked healthy and well fed in comparison to the drawn faces you were used to, and you knew they had never been starved for fresh food or racked by dengue. Willy stared at them boldly because they were new and did not stare back.

Then he realized what he must have looked like arriving in New Zealand—robust and untainted and awed by a challenge to prove himself. Now he felt incredibly old and stained and drew up the rake to lean on its handle. He was going on nineteen but felt twice that. He was as young as these men but had aged radically with little assistance from time. In less than two years he had progressed from that fresh-out-of-high-school look to a beat-up cynicism pulling down his mouth and hardening his eyes, even without wrinkles. Once he had considered youth a handicap. Now he was afraid he had tossed it away before he should have.

He felt sorry for these replacements. They halted beside the adjutant's tent and dropped their packs to wait for military wheels to grind and dispose of them. He wished they had not had to come out here and learn to go dry with fear and sick from the stench of dead buddies. They were not ready for it. The island was not ready for them. They should not have been shipped to Saipan while it was still strewn with unburied corpses, crawling with unsundered Japs, bitter with sorrow and suffering. They would get dengue and diarrhea and lose their healthy look, and it was all wrong.

He blushed for the welcome they got from the flabby-faced adjutant. They were merely another problem to him, and he

wanted to know why in hell they hadn't brought cots and where the devil their record books were. Nobody thanked them for coming overseas to help win a war, and you thought of the old boot-camp greeting—"You'll be sorry!"

He lowered the rake to start work on his penance once more as one of the new men stepped toward him. He looked again and abruptly lost all sympathy for the newcomers.

"I'll be dipped in spit," he said.

It was Clay Gosse. He wore a corporal's stripes now. He looked not only clean and healthy but almost fat. He not only escaped combat by getting a dream wound but came back with a promotion and in charge of a replacement detail. He threw his helmet at harmless old Japs on Hawaii but never fired a shot at the true enemy. You saw your best friend die uselessly, but Clay Gosse came up smelling like a rose.

"Willy boy," he said. "Are you on EPD already?"

He held out his hand, but Willy did not shake it.

"You smart son of a bitch," he said. "Why do good men get killed instead of suckers like you?"

Gosse let his hand drop, smiling a little. His fine tight skin looked oily and brown as if lubricated daily with suntan lotion.

"I'm too mean to die," he said. "Besides, I got a date in Tokyo. Where's the rest of the gang? Bonelli? Leeper? Jones?"

"Dead, except Leeper."

For a moment Gosse looked startled. Then he shrugged.

"We can't all be lucky."

Willy wanted to beat his smug face with the rake's tines.

"Get away from here," he said. "Get yourself assigned to another company, you contemptible bastard. Stay clear away from me."

Gosse walked back to the adjutant's tent, and Willy raked viciously at taro until the mail orderly came panting up with a sack of mail on his shoulder and a few loose letters in his hand.

"Here you go, chum," he said. "For you and the police sergeant."

Willy took the letters and dropped his rake, watching the mail

orderly trot on down the hill like a small gnome with a large sack of gold. The sun had gone behind cliffs above camp, and another hot night was about to begin. There was still light to read by, but the trouble was that nothing beyond here seemed real enough to need reading about. Yet you had to go on trying to believe in a regular world.

He sat down with his back against the trunk of a palm tree and sorted through the letters. There were six for the police sergeant and two for him. He put the police sergeant's sugar reports in his hip pocket, then wondered whether to start with Judy or Frances.

They would both be disappointing he knew. You cannot bridge an ocean with pen and ink. But the letter from Frances was a greater disappointment than he anticipated. She and Lloyd and the kids had moved from Spokane to Portland, Oregon. The news gave him a tricky feeling of nostalgia. He had never been deeply attached to that house in Spokane, yet it was the best home he had known. Now it had vanished. Lloyd had taken a job in a shipyard, Frances hoped Andy would come to visit them there, but Portland meant nothing to him. Another piece of his life had slipped down the drain, and he had so little to lose that even this was a major loss.

He tore open the other envelope, too tired to cope with the idea of homelessness. Judy's neat script reassured him, but when he began to read her words they made no sense. They did not say anything acceptable, and he kept reading them over and over, yet they always came out the same. Judy was marrying another man. She was not waiting for Andrew Willy. She was giving him up for someone closer, and her letter stated and restated just that.

. . . I would give anything to know you understand. The thought of hurting you worries me sick. You don't deserve to be hurt by something none of us can help, but if you were here I'm afraid it would have happened anyway. We were so young when we thought we were in love, and now with Beecher I see . . .

At last he stopped reading. He sat motionless against the palm tree and seemed to feel his heart turn to bone. Twilight already

blurred the outlines of banana trees and tents and men waiting beside the adjutant's office, but he hardly noticed. His last hope had been a false one too, and every reason for living appeared to fade away as inexorably as the last color from the evening sky.

Because if Judy doesn't want me, he thought, then no one does. Not a single person cares whether I come back, so why bother?

*A dropping sweat creeps cold on every part;
Against his bosom beats his quivering heart . . .*

chapter 11

1

He woke up sweating and dreaded being awake. It was unnecessary before reveille, yet something had shaken his cot and dragged him back to consciousness. He rolled onto his stomach with his legs spread to decrease their sweating, but sleep was gone.

Even stark naked on a bare mattress he felt smothered in heat. No air came through the mesh of his mosquito net. No air came under the rolled-up sidewalls of the tent. Without opening his eyes he knew the March sun was already up and as searing as it had been in July or September or December. If only the season would change. If only once the sky would be overcast from horizon to horizon. If only for a few hours at night there would be coolness and a relief from summer. Autumn and spring used to be wonderful times of year in Spokane, but Saipan's everlasting summer was stupefying. He rubbed his damp forehead on the damp mattress and wondered what ice tasted like.

Then he heard B-29s going over toward Japan. They were noisy, but their familiar drone had not wakened him. Once more

his cot shook, and he turned his head to see why. It was Charlotte the Harlot.

"You devil," he said softly. "Knock it off."

Again Charlotte pounced across the mosquito net. This time it sagged against his buttocks and claws dug in. He jumped sideways.

"I said knock it off, dammit."

Charlotte's tail switched, and the cat crouched as though hiding. Private Willy had to smile. It was not much of a cat—stunted, skinny, poorly marked—but it was something domestic to feel possessive about. Yet even with the cat he had been cheated. Doc Frechette had given it to him as a kitten and told him it was female. In spite of the doctor's opinion Charlotte was developing the accouterments of a tomcat, and a rather neurotic tom besides. He was the only cat in camp and led a dog's life since other men preferred dogs and treated Charlotte like one. He came when you whistled, drank beer, and ignored Spam.

The cat pranced across the swaying net like a drunken acrobat, crouched again, and leaped for his buttocks. Willy pulled the side of the net from under his mattress, reached up, and pulled Charlotte into bed with him. The whole animal was hardly a good handful.

"Now lay still," he said.

As he stroked the short fur Charlotte began a coarse rusty purring, but as soon as Willy loosened his hold the cat sprang away. Willy tucked the loose net under the mattress to keep his pet inside, but when he tried to subdue him into an ordinary house cat Charlotte turned dog. He bit and growled at Willy's hand until the game became too strenuous. Finally Willy held the head and four legs fast in one hand and thought how easy it would be to snap Charlotte's slender bones as Charlotte snapped the bones of mice. Life was so fragile, yet so durable and precious.

Then he remembered why he dreaded today. They would start loading for Okinawa. Somehow time on Saipan had crept along for more than half a year since their return from Tinian, and now they were supposed to be ready for combat again. You

never were ready for combat again after the first one, but at least you could make this the last one. You could do something brave or foolish and get killed fast. Maybe you could shoot old Lard Face before charging head-on into a machine-gun nest and cooking your own goose. In any case the day was here, and even if you had no intention of fighting another whole campaign the precious and durable part of you dreaded the end.

Without thinking he squeezed the small life in his hand so hard that Charlotte yelped. Willy drew the cat up to his face and held him there for a moment of apology. Charlotte began purring once more, and Willy raised up to see if any of his tentmates were watching.

The other five men still slept. So did men in the next tent a few feet away, although on down the line you could hear early birds stirring as the sun grew brighter and reveille neared. Willy rested on his elbow and stared at the crowded quarters. On two-by-four stringers hung mess gear, cartridge belts, helmets, ponchos, packs, and small arms—Gosse's pistol, Willy's BAR, Leeper's carbine, Campbell's bazooka, and two M-1s. Sea bags and shelves made of packing boxes filled the space between cots and around the centerpole. For six months they had all lived together in this helpless intimacy.

Like being married, he thought. Without a bit of love.

Because he knew every contour and blemish and habit of his five tentmates. He knew their minds so thoroughly that he could tell what they would say before they decided to say it. He slept with them, ate with them, worked with them, showered with them, and spent his leisure time with them. Nothing about any of them seemed unrevealed, except the one saving grace that might have made them bearable in real marriage—love.

And even love—or sex—was so often discussed that it seemed no more attractive than Charlotte's propensity for mice. He tried to frown on love since Judy's defection, yet sometimes at night before sleep came the memory of dusky concupiscence in Hilo or Honokaa grew inadequate and he caught himself longing

specifically for Judy. He would try to fool himself into thinking he longed for an ideal girl who must remain faceless and nameless until he met her, but it never worked. Judy herself, another man's wife, teased him some nights until he was weak with hating the very necessity for women.

Then he woke up to this—semi-marriage to five men he could not divorce. Leeper slept close enough to touch and depended on Willy for everything. Captain Bean had made him company jeep driver in the battalion motor pool, yet every time he drove out of camp on new paved highways he watched wild-eyed for Japs. It took something out of you just to be with him. Even asleep he looked pathetic.

And there was Gosse. If you got to heaven thinking you were free of him at last, he would probably turn up on guard duty at the Pearly Gates. You could never like him, yet his very persistence got you. At least he was frankly what he was. You could insult him and be insulted back with a candor that cleared the air. The other four men clung to a vague sense of decency and wore skivvy shorts at night, but Gosse and Willy slept naked for the added iota of coolness. Now beyond Leeper you could see the whole undisguised Clay Gosse—rigidly masculine and unrefined. It was hardly a pleasant sight, but it was honest.

Opposite Gosse lay Campbell, who had been a replacement on Hawaii but was a veteran here. He never shut up. He talked all day long, and at night snored. His snores helped keep you awake when memories got vivid, and he was snoring now as though periodically imitating a B-29.

The other two men were Saipan replacements. The one called Duncan reminded Willy of Maynard Flynn who had been killed with Lt. Coble in New Zealand, except that Duncan's innocence bordered on stupidity. He was built like a halfback and was obviously intended to take care of himself, but he got all fouled up the minute he left home. It was not a case of having loved and lost, but of having not loved and won. He told about it daily, if anyone would listen.

"See, she lived with her mother," he would say. "Both of 'em was bad, see, and I knew I shouldn't mess around. But you know how it is. Only the night I went there I was too drunk to do anything. Honest. I passed out, see. I don't remember nothin' till morning, then I got the hell out as fast as I could. But a couple of months later she writes me she's pregnant. I'm the father, she says, and I better marry her or else. Well, golly." At this point he blushed crimson every time. "I was only eighteen, and I was scared. I didn't want my family to hear about it, see, and I figured she might be right. So I got leave and married her, but holy cow." And this was what actually floored him. "Before I went back to camp I seen she only wanted my allotment check. Her old lady prolly rigged the whole deal, see. Then I got shipped overseas before I could get a blood test and prove it wasn't my baby, and I couldn't get the marriage annulled. And now, goddammit, I can't even stop the allotment checks."

If you laughed he looked stunned. If you sympathized he practically ate out of your hand. You could not afford to have him around your neck along with Leeper, so you avoided him as much as possible. But you could not avoid any of them satisfactorily.

The other replacement was a clam-mouthed farmer named Grbac. Nobody believed it could be spelled Grbac, but it was, and a fellow in another company spelled his name Vrbancic. He read the Bible every night and was obnoxiously superior because no one else did. Willy read a lot of other things in those days, almost anything he could get hold of, and finally asked Grbac for the Bible. He intended to read it straight through like a novel and know once and for all what it was about, but it embarrassed him. Clay Gosse's sneering did not embarrass him, yet the unbelievable fables of Genesis and Exodus did. He could not understand why whole nations claimed to live by those fables literally, and when he got into Leviticus he bogged down completely and returned the Bible to Grbac. It was fine to have an ancient version of the Beginning, but how could you take isolated passages and call them gospel? *A man also or woman that hath a familiar*

spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones; their blood shall be upon them.

No. Grbac was no more enlightened than the rest of them. In a way he was more detestable for being so self-righteous, but you shared this idiotic life with all five equally, and a thousand more in the battalion besides, and there was no escape. There was no solitude. To Be Alone had become as priceless as the End of the War. To eat alone, to sleep alone, to think alone, became a passion. Willy tried every way he knew of keeping aloof—by surliness and withdrawal and the solitary activity of reading—but other men were always there, crowding him. Even if he were to die on Okinawa he would die in the midst of them.

He twitched suddenly in revulsion as reveille sounded. The tortured bugle blast drowned out the drone of B-29s and snoring and Charlotte's purring, and the official day started. Willy jerked the mosquito net from under his mattress, and Charlotte fell to the deck on his back, not quick enough to land on his feet as a cat should. He scampered away outside. Willy swung his bare feet onto dusty plywood, sat with the mosquito net tight across his face, and took a sort of masochistic pleasure in watching his five tentmates react to reveille exactly as he knew they would.

Grbac sat up and stared at his long bony toes in a daze, as if contemplating resurrection after Gabriel's horn. He would be the last dressed, late for roll call, and one of the last to breakfast.

Without opening his eyes or losing his expression of saintly innocence Duncan said, "Shit." Then he slid his hands into his skivvies and began scratching himself. Everyone scratched himself, but Duncan did it more than anyone else. He would go on doing it until forced to stand at attention for reveille roll call.

Campbell stopped snoring and rolled over onto his face, smearing his lips out against the mattress. "If that lousy field music gets any lousier," he said, "they'll have to court-martial him for carelessly endangering his own life." It was typically tactless.

"Hit the deck, you Jap-killers," Gosse said in his cotton-mouthed way. He jumped up wide awake, slipped into his dungaree pants, and folded his mosquito net back neatly. "We got a date in

Okinawa, you-all." Then he put on his shoes, grabbed his mess gear from its nail on the stringer, and trotted out of the tent toward the head.

At that moment another evil of the day began—the distorted amplification of popular music from loud-speakers hanging on tall posts throughout the battalion area. Jo Stafford suddenly started wailing "I'll Be Seeing You" as if a siren had been turned on full blast at one of its higher pitches. Private Willy felt persecuted. The nearest loud-speaker was aimed directly at his sack, and he not only received its full volume but several lagging echoes from loud-speakers further away. It reminded him of the eternal radio in the Spokane house of Lloyd and Frances, and many tunes somehow reminded him of Judy Powell.

He grabbed his pants and put them on, then got out from under the mosquito net and realized that Leeper had not moved.

"Bony," he said, "reveille just went."

"I know." Leeper opened his eyes and avoided Willy's. "But I'm afraid I can't make it this morning."

"What's the matter now?"

"My stomach. I think I might puke."

He was faking again. He often got sick before field problems in the hills where a few live Japs still held out, and he was scared to death of Okinawa. But you should not give in to fear.

"You're dreaming," Campbell said as he started to dress. "No one could be lucky enough to get sick before combat."

"He might be," Duncan said.

Willy loathed them both for their stupidity.

"I'll send the corpsman over," he told Leeper.

"Don't bother," Leeper said. "I'll be all right, Andy. It's probably only appendicitis. I've had it before."

"Sure, but stay there. I'll tell Barnyard."

"Thanks." Leeper closed his eyes gratefully.

Willy slipped on his socks and shoes, took his mess gear from the stringer, and followed Gosse toward the head. Sgt. Barnard was already bellowing for the platoon to fall in, and Willy hurried to tell him about Leeper. Sgt. Barnard swore not at Leeper but at

the necessity for looking after him. When Grbac at last came straggling from the tent the platoon stood at attention for roll call, took their Atabrine tablets, and were dismissed.

Private Willy fell in at the end of the chow line with Duncan. Most of the men wore only shoes and trousers, and their tanned torsos looked greasy with sweat in the morning sun. The line moved along in a rattle of mess gear as men ahead dunked their kits into a GI can of boiling water and shook them dry. The smell of breakfast was unappetizing in the hot air. Gosse fell in behind Willy.

"Leeper's goldbrickin' for sure this time," he said.

"So what?" Willy asked.

"So he's chicken-shit," Gosse said.

"Everybody can't be a big hero like you."

"Who said hero? But I ain't no coward either."

"You sure as hell spent the last campaign in Hawaii."

"I won't spend this one there."

"I wouldn't mind," Duncan said.

"You won't have a chance," Gosse told him. "Even if you got a dream wound you'd be brought back to the hospital here."

"I wouldn't even mind that," Duncan said.

"Aw, you don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Neither do you," Willy said. "So shut your cotton-pickin' mouth."

"I know I've had enough Saipan, no matter how bad Okinawa is."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd ever seen a real day's combat."

"What about Tarawa?"

"Where were you the first day?"

"I got ashore soon enough."

"Wait till big-island artillery zeroes in on you."

"For chrissake, why don't you get appendicitis, Willy?"

"Drop dead, you brown-nosed bastard."

"Don't gimme that. Bean ain't my buddy either."

"Why you guys got it in for the captain?" Duncan asked.

"Because he's a fat double-crossing son of a bitch," Willy said.

"And if Willy don't shoot him first, I will," Gosse said. "If we both miss, Lt. McGhee can have a turn."

"Oh my gosh," Duncan said. "How you talk."

Inside the screened galley they held out mess kits for scrambled powdered eggs, bacon fat, and mush. They went to a table and poured powdered milk mixture over the mush. It ran into the bacon and eggs. Private Willy's stomach knotted at the sight and smell and taste of the food. He left most of it but drank a full cup of coffee, listening to endless predictable bitching about the chow and heat and coming combat. When the smell of disinfectant became unbearable he hurried outside, emptied his breakfast into the garbage can, hung his fork and spoon over the handle of his mess kit, and quickly splashed them in soapy wash water and milky rinse water. Then he went back to his tent and found Leeper all dressed.

"What's the deal?" he asked as he hung his mess gear on its nail.

"Doc Frechette came by and said he'd send me to the army hospital."

"Good." Willy sat down, already tired. "For an operation?"

"They don't know yet." Leeper was gathering his gear together, keeping one hand across his abdomen to ease the pain. "I told him I was all right. I hate to have you guys shove off without me."

"Don't worry." Willy reached for his dungaree jacket and poncho to take with him on the working detail at the docks. He felt nauseated himself. "If you can get out of anything, for god's sake do."

"Yeah," Leeper said. "But I shouldn't let you guys down."

"Don't pull that old crap." Willy started to say he was more trouble than he was worth but did not have the heart. "Maybe they'll evacuate you now like they ought to. But if you do come back, take care of Charlotte. I'll miss him quite a bit."

"Sure, Andy." Leeper was ready to head for sick bay then. He stood for a moment between the cots looking around the crowded tent. Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. "If I don't see you

again before you shove off," he said, "take good care of yourself, Andy. Because you're the only real buddy I've got left, and I'd—I'd——"

His voice broke, and his sentimentality infuriated Willy.

"Yeah," Willy said. "Sure, sure. Be seeing you, Bony."

2

On April Fools' Day the first troops hit Okinawa. There were high thin clouds in the sky, and it was rather chilly after the heat of Saipan. They were only 300 miles south of Kyushu, Japan, and water of the East China Sea looked yellow instead of clear Pacific blue. The island was so much larger than Tarawa or Saipan that burning or heavily blasted areas appeared very minor, the bulk of it untouched. There were more ships offshore than had taken part in the other landings, but more of them seemed to get hit too. Jap planes called Kamikazes were breaking through, and on the port beam an LST drifted in flames and black smoke. Then a transport from up ahead in the convoy dropped back with a smoking hole in the stern. It began to look like Tarawa's battle in the water on a bigger scale, and Willy did not want to watch any more.

His division was in floating reserve with nothing to do that first day except make a feint of empty boats against eastern beaches while the actual landing took place on western beaches. If anything was going to happen to the ship it would happen whether he watched or not, so he went below to his sack and tried to sleep, wearing a life jacket.

The next morning they were not called ashore either. Again empty boats made a feint toward eastern beaches, then the convoy of the entire division withdrew to open blue sea and made erratic circles on the water for days and days without sighting land or planes or other ships.

Private Willy felt rigid with surprise. They had never been kept out of a fight before. He wanted to go in if it had to be, yet that durably precious thing within him welcomed delay. Suspense was

insufferable, yet he sat topside for hours on end staring at blue water closely to make sure it did not turn back into the muddy yellow of Okinawa's water.

"How's it going, Willy?" Lt. McGhee asked behind him. He looked up and saw the lieutenant wink at him. He started to get up, but the lieutenant put a heavy hand on his shoulder to hold him down—or hold himself steady. Lt. McGhee seemed drunk. He looked as he had back in camp during week-long binges after the officers' monthly liquor ration arrived. His broad face had a happy expression, his eyes were slow-moving, and his beard shadow was darker than usual. But Willy did not know how he could get drunk aboard ship. The crew was rumored to have jungle juice, but it was kept from the troops.

"Hi, Lieutenant," he said. "Any word on when we land?"

"Eff on when we land," the lieutenant said. "Confucius say if rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it. God in his infinite mercy spares us one D day, so don't question His mysterious ways."

"Nosir." The lieutenant was drunk all right, and it was too bad. Everybody knew he drank too much, but they had expected him to cut it out when the chips were down. He shouldn't go ashore with the shakes.

"Let old Lard Face worry about when we go ashore," the lieutenant said. "He's the one who needs medals for a promotion."

"Yessir."

"You and me don't give an effing good goddamn, Willy boy. Cause you and me don't believe in God and the Marine Corps. Am I right?"

"Yessir."

"Aw, knock off the yessir-nosir crud." The lieutenant sank to the hatch cover cross-legged beside Willy. His face was beaded with sweat, as though he might get sick pretty soon. You hated seeing him like that. He had gone downhill ever since Captain Bean showed up. "When a man's got a snootful," Lt. McGhee said, "he doesn't have rank, Willy. I'm sorry you aren't drunk,

but we expended all the sick-bay alcohol Frechette could smuggle out. You know how it is."

"Sure, Lieutenant."

"I know it's selfish, but you take what you can get in this man's outfit." He hung his head and rubbed his face, feeling queazy already. "In fact it's god-awful," he said. "But I can't seem to turn down the stuff any more. Not while there's no hope of getting home to my wife and kid." He stared across bright blue water. "Think of it, Willy. My son's over a year old and I've never seen him. If we hit the beach here I may never see him. That's what drives me to drink." He snorted and stared at the hatch cover between his legs. "I hardly remember what my wife looks like, and I used to think I couldn't live five minutes without her. Now it's been twenty effing months, and look at me." He hit the dirty dungarees on his thighs with his hands and shook his head. "Drunk half the time, nasty-tempered, foul-mouthed, scared to death. I am scared, Willy. I don't know how I'll manage ashore without a snort now and then. On Tarawa I prayed once in a while, but that's no good since you——" He turned with a frown. "How come you're an atheist without being alcoholic?"

"I'm not an atheist, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant squinted.

"I thought you were my buddy," he said.

"Well I am, Lieutenant." Willy wanted to be left alone by Mr. McGhee too, yet felt obliged to straighten him out. "They call you an atheist if you don't believe in their god and wonder why you don't blow your brains out if there aren't gonna be gold streets or harps or anything. But I don't see why that's so wonderful. I don't see why life can't be a greater gift than afterlife. God's better than what somebody dreamed up two or three thousand years ago, and you aren't strictly an atheist if you believe in some sort of supreme being."

"Well I'll be damned," the lieutenant said.

"It's superstitious stuff I don't go along with, Mr. McGhee." He doubted that the lieutenant was sober enough to understand, but

as long as he had started he thought he might as well finish. "Angels and saints and chosen people and all. But I believe there's a scheme to things, like Salty used to say. And if God wanted us to know what it was he wouldn't sneak around with fiery bushes and voices in the wilderness. He'd stand up and tell everybody without any Wizard of Oz hocus-pocus. I've been reading a lot lately, Lieutenant, and I believe what science has found out shows a more perfect universe than anybody could imagine when the Bible was written. I figure God's even bigger than we realize, because—oh hell, Lieutenant. That's my opinion anyhow. Technically I'm not an atheist."

It was very hot in the sun, and Lt. McGhee was in no condition to sit directly in it. His face had become sallow and his beard blacker.

"I'll be damned," he said. Then he stood up slowly. "You slay me, Willy. You always slay me, and I'm not as strong as I used to be. Think I'll go below. Something I ate didn't agree with me."

He walked aft to officers' country as though the seas were rough, and Willy wondered why a man with a wife and son to live for showed less staying power than a man with nothing to live for.

The next day loud-speakers announced the death of President Roosevelt, and there was a feeling of loss throughout the ship that seemed more immediate and personal than the dying taking place just over the horizon on Okinawa. Everyone was subdued. Roosevelt had been President for as long as Willy could remember, and he did not know if there could be a replacement or whether the entire country and its war effort now were as much adrift as this convoy of transports in the middle of nowhere. It seemed as if the nation itself were breaking down under strain. Maybe the confusion of war would get out of hand until the whole race of man was reduced to exhausted chaos. He went to memorial services on the after decks with other men and saw Lt. McGhee looking grim and sick among other officers. Presidents, lieutenants, and privates were all taking a beating, and what was anyone gaining?

But the next day brought the strangest elation of any day overseas. Loud-speakers announced that they would not have to land on Okinawa. They had been ordered back to Saipan.

3

Camp looked more than a month deserted. Grass and weeds had grown knee-deep where they used to be kept cut or trampled down. The few standing tents sagged sadly, and sun had bleached them gray. Maybe they had been like that before you left, but now they looked as Godforsaken as abandoned stateside homesteads. Most of the tents had been stripped from plywood decks, and rows of bare wooden squares lay among the weeds. Some dry canefields had sprouted green again, and you knew the simplest thing would have been to leave the whole torrid island to its vegetative desires. Yet maybe it was better than Okinawa.

Charlotte the Harlot had disappeared, although Leeper was still there. He had been discharged from the hospital without surgery and attached to the division's rear echelon as a guard in the dismantled battalion area. He was so glad to see the outfit that he wept while the trucks unloaded. No one was quite that glad to see him.

They replaced faded pyramidal tents on plywood decks and for several weeks remained on stand-by in case they were needed up north. But only the Eighth Marines went back to help out, then the stand-by was lifted altogether. They restored camp to military order, began training again, and all at once the ingrown monotony of Saipan seemed never to have been interrupted. The war in Germany did end, but that was another war in another world. Your war was not over. Japan itself was next, and training became more intensive and more objectionable.

Hot marches the length and breadth of Saipan tormented men who for a year now had crept and crawled over so much of the island that merely to look at it was punishment. Not even many live Japs remained at large in the hills to furnish authentic targets, and even Leeper occasionally got out of his jeep in the field with-

out flinching at every rustle of sultry breeze through dry cane. Sometimes you tried to imagine being rotated stateside if the Marine Corps adopted a point system, but no matter how you figured your time overseas and the time required to mount a big invasion you knew that somehow you would be present on D day.

In the middle of July they hiked up the central ridge above the groomed area around the island commander's headquarters. While Captain Bean briefed his officers in pedantic detail for an exercise they could have done in their sleep, Private Willy lay flat on his back with his head propped against his helmet. Leeper came over from the jeep to sit beside him, and the rest of the platoon lay where they had fallen to catch their breaths. Willy wondered how many foot-pounds of energy he had wasted on this sort of drill since joining the Marine Corps. He decided it must be enough to move Spokane halfway to Portland, then suddenly remembered the date.

"Hey, Bony," he said. "Today's our anniversary."

"Aw, shucks," Campbell said. "Didn't know you guys were married."

"Blow it," Willy told him. But he saw Leeper frowning without understanding either. "The day we left San Diego—two years ago."

"Oh," Leeper said. His face got all homesick. "Gee. Two years."

"Twenty-four effing months," Willy said. You were definitely a short-timer after twenty-four months. They did not give you a medal or anything for endurance, but twenty-four months set a kind of unofficial end to patriotic effort. After that you were on borrowed time.

"I got in seven months," Duncan said. "Only seventeen to go."

"Seventeen to go till what?" Willy asked.

"Till I have enough time to be rotated like you guys."

"Yeah." Willy sat up and looked seaward. From the top of the ridge you could see most of the island and far across the water to the east and west. The light blue of Tanapag Harbor and mixed blues of currents and differing depths further out were as bright as

raw pigments. But there was not a large ship on all that water. "See those transports down there coming to take us home?"

"Relax," Campbell said. "The war'll be over by Christmas."

"Who says?" Willy lay down again. "Dugout Doug?"

"Hell no. The boys at the B-29 field give good odds."

"For them it might be," Willy said. "They get rotated faster."

"You sound bitter," Campbell said.

"Why not?" Willy stared at the vapid sky, still impressed by this milestone. "Leeper," he said, "let's celebrate."

"What with?" Leeper asked.

"Duncan, Campbell, how's to sell us your beer ration tonight?"

"Willy, I love you," Campbell said. "You got such pretty eyes. But I wouldn't sell that one lousy can of warm beer to Rita Hayworth."

"Me too," Duncan said.

"Preacher," Willy called to Grbac, "want your beer tonight?"

"Don't be stupid," Grbac said.

It was hopeless. Each man had one can of beer each evening, and that was the extent of it. There was no other source of supply. Lt. McGhee gave you a snort of whisky on occasion, but he had been sober all week so you knew his monthly ration of hard liquor was gone. The chance of getting drunk to celebrate anything seemed as remote as the chance of being rotated, yet the need for a brief escape from strangling monotony gnawed at Willy all morning while he advanced with his platoon across steep gullies cutting the central ridge.

At noon he rode the jeep back to camp with Leeper to bring out hot chow for the company. Roads were superhighways now, and entire coral cliffs that you remembered fighting for had been moved to make runways for B-29s or foundations for acres of warehouses and living quarters. They passed another jeep full of women—genuine American nurses. The island had become so civilized that women were fairly common, yet you resented it. They were kept under guard and allowed to go nowhere without an officer escort. They were marked Do Not Touch for enlisted men. They were another special privilege for officers, like monthly

liquor allowances, and you could not help resenting pleasures you were deprived of. The island now had regular movies, occasional stage shows, a radio station, endless music from loudspeakers, and organized athletics, but it was all dished up by the numbers. It never satisfied your instinct for individuality. You could not even get quietly drunk to protest interminable restraints, yet protest was necessary.

"I tell you what let's do," Willy said as the jeep rolled through a valley where rusting Jap tanks sat covered completely by vines. On field problems you used to find rotting Jap corpses, but nowadays you just found crumbling bones. "Let's save our beer for a while. Let's hide it every night for a couple of weeks, then drink it all at once and get roaring drunk like the officers."

"What for, Andy?"

"Oh Christ, Bony. For the sheer hell of it. To celebrate two years of crap. In memory of Bonelli and Jones. A send-off to Japan."

"They'd put us in the brig on piss and punk," he said.

"Let 'em. At least we'd know what it feels like to be happy again. Don't you remember how we used to get drunk in your basement?"

Leeper's cheeks pinched up. Any mention of home hurt him.

"Yeah," he said: "My dad didn't appreciate it either."

"But we did it anyway, Bony. We had fun. We thought we were big he-men, but now let's see if we can't be kids again."

Leeper did not look at him. He was a careful driver and kept his eyes on the road, but even not driving he seldom faced you squarely.

"We couldn't get very drunk on three-point-two beer," he said.

"We could on a case of it. Say fifteen cans apiece."

"But I'm scared of what——"

"I know you're scared," Willy said. "You're always scared. You're scared of officers and scared of living and scared of not living. Jesus, Bony. You didn't used to be a worry-wart. You had a hell of a good time in New Zealand with Chick Woodruff. And you haven't had it as rough as I have since then. You didn't

kill anybody by accident or otherwise, so why don't you snap out of it before it's too late?"

He saw Leeper blinking fast as he steered the jeep around a long curve above camp. He knew he should not have lost his temper, but in a moment Leeper smiled and apparently there was no harm done.

"Okay," Leeper said. "Fair dinkum, Andy. Whatever you say."

4

It took nearly a month to save fifteen cans apiece. Some nights Willy got too thirsty to resist the beer, and some nights he drank it simply because he did not believe the scheme would work anyway. But whenever he did pretend to hold back his brew to drink at the movie, Leeper followed suit. As soon as no one else was around they hid the cans in the bottom of their sea bags, and the hoard grew.

"We've done it, Bony," Willy said one evening when he realized that the ration he held in his hand was the fifteenth unopened can of beer in his possession. He felt giddy. The supply seemed inexhaustible, but they had to wait for the movie to begin before getting down to business. Even Grbac went to most movies, so for a couple of hours each evening their tent and flanking tents were empty. It was not much time for a celebration, yet you could get drunk if you kept at it. Two cans of beer every fifteen minutes ought to do the trick. You should be nearly insensible by taps.

When the other four men took their ponchos and left for the amphitheater as it started getting dark, Willy grinned.

"They'll drop their teeth when they see us after the show," he said. "Come on, Lieutenant Leeper. Let's be officers tonight."

He dragged his sea bag into the aisle between his sack and Bony's, then punched holes in the two newest cans of beer with an opener hanging on a string at the head of his cot. Leeper pulled his sea bag out between his feet but looked as though he did not trust so much beer.

"It gives me funny ideas," he said. "I'll stay sober and put you to bed."

"Oh hell." Willy handed him one of the opened cans. "We're already in our sacks. All we have to do is fall backwards and pass out. Let yourself go, Captain. Here's to two stinking years in a sweat."

"Almost twenty-five months now." Leeper let Willy complete the toast by banging the cans together, then they both drank. Willy drank as if he had accumulated a two-year thirst. He drank the whole tepid can of beer without taking a breath, gulping it down in mouthfuls.

"Man." He tossed the empty can recklessly outside and dug into his sea bag for another. "One away, fourteen to go."

Leeper watched him and smiled a bit. He had only drunk part of his beer as you normally nursed along a one-can ration. "Remember that New Zealand brew in quart bottles?" he said. "Me and Chick Woodruff used to see who could drink the most without taking a breath. Chick always won." His smile faded. "Poor Chick."

"Don't get morbid, Bony." Willy punched holes in a fresh can and drank it too without a pause for breath. That left him gasping. "Whew." He tossed the second empty outside and slapped Leeper's knee. "Come on, Major. Practice this chug-a-lug stuff."

Leeper slowly finished his first can and set the empty on the deck. Willy handed him another opened one, then dug a replacement out of Leeper's sea bag to keep the score even. Maybe Clay Gosse would have been more enthusiastic to celebrate with, but in another half hour it would not matter much who sat across from you. Willy punched holes in a third can but could not drain the beer off all at once.

"Keerist," he said, panting with effort.

"You're doing fine, Andy." Leeper looked mildly amused. He might loosen up eventually. "If you run out you can have the rest of mine."

"There's plenty for both. Too bad we don't have a couple dames."

"They shouldn't let dames on the island."

"It'd be all right if they had enough for everyone."

"Not these kind of dames, Andy."

"Call me Colonel. I'll be higher than that before long."

"Sure, Colonel. But when I was in the hospital with appendicitis those army nurses didn't care whether I lived or died. They wouldn't come near me unless they had to. They treated me like dirt."

"Because you weren't a colonel then." Willy did not want to hear about the hospital mistreatment again. He only wanted to feel free for once of anything like it. "But with beer you've got rank. Come on. Drink up, cobber. Get happy. Women are for the birds anyhow."

"The right ones aren't, Andy. What about Judy?"

"She's a bitch like the rest of 'em."

"You shouldn't say that."

"For chrissake, what should I say about another man's wife?"

He had not meant to call her a name, but he found that it could be done with surprising ease. He drank the rest of his third beer and threw the empty can outside in vicious satisfaction.

"Don't get mad," Leeper said. "I was just thinking how I never have been in love. That might be part of my trouble. Sometimes I've thought of going back to New Zealand to see Chick's wife. I liked her. Or if I had a girl waiting in the states maybe I wouldn't wish I was——"

"You know damn well they don't wait." Willy bent over to punch holes in another can. He felt quite dizzy with his head down, but Leeper was keeping it from being fun. "Let's forget dames. Let's pretend we prefer stag parties. Here's to our rotation, General."

Leeper held out his can for the toast and seemed to come back into things a little. He sipped his beer and glanced at Willy from time to time with a timid smile. You had to like the poor devil even if he had broken down so badly. He meant well. He could not help his shortcomings and might have turned out all right in Spokane if——

But tonight was no night to worry about what might have been. It was a night to flush out clogged drains and oil up rusty pipes and get ready for the next pile of garbage they dumped on you. Willy kept pouring tepid beer into himself and burping it back into his throat. He was getting bloated, but he was also beginning to see a haze around the single light bulb in the tent. With radio loud-speakers turned off you could hear disconnected snatches of dialogue and sound from the movie in the amphitheater. Willy felt an urge to laugh, so he laughed.

"You're getting way ahead of me," Leeper said.

"It's your own fault, General. If we don't drink now those other guys'll take it away from us. Do you realize this is the first time I've had a chance to get loaded since I went AOL with Salty?"

"That time you got busted?"

"Yeah, we were drunk a whole week then. About a year and a half ago, General. Do you still wonder why I wanted to get drunk tonight?"

"That isn't much to remember, is it? I mean with what happened to Salty and all, only that to remember in a year and a half."

"Salty wouldn't've let it get him." Willy poured another mouthful of beer into himself and found he could even think of Salty with some detachment. "I just hope he knows it was an accident."

"Sure he knows, Andy. Everybody knows."

"Except that son of a bitch Bean." Willy suddenly felt loquacious. He leaned forward confidentially. "Bean's a turd-bird, Bony. He's the crummiest goddamn officer in this battalion. Honest, if we'd landed on Okinawa I'd've plugged the bastard if somebody else hadn't've beat me to it. Mr. McGhee hates his guts too."

"Mr. McGhee's all right," Leeper said.

"He treats us like humans anyhow. Here's to McGhee, General."

Beer seemed to run out his pores as fast as he drank it, but

dizziness was becoming more pronounced and he could hardly see the expression on Leeper's face a few feet away. It was wonderful.

"The lieutenant's helped me a lot," he heard Leeper saying when he had burped again. "You know, when I been sick and all."

"He gave me a slug of whisky when Bean court-martialed me. It's a shame he drinks so much, but we could use more officers like him. Kocopy was pretty good that way. Remember Lt. Kocopy?"

"Yeah. Too bad he had to die."

"He didn't die, did he?"

"I heard he did. Aboard ship going stateside."

"Well I'll be damned." So many had gone from the battalion that it was hard to keep the record straight—which were dead, which evacuated with wounds, and which rotated back to the states on time. Willy blinked at the fuzzy light. It pulsed a little now. "He was a real card with his broken nose and big cigar. Let's drink to old Kocopy, General."

Willy finished another can of beer and tossed the empty out into the night. He had forgotten it was possible to feel so exuberant. He decided to move around a little and test it.

"I gotta go," he said. "Excuse me a minute, General."

But instead of walking clear to the head he discovered that he was bold enough to stand right outside and splash the recent contents of the beer cans onto the ground beside them. He felt delightfully off balance and indifferent to orders forbidding you to take a leak in the company streets. He would not have cared if Sgt. Barnard or Captain Bean or Colonel Pary himself had come along. He would merely have said that General Willy took a leak wherever he damn well pleased.

The moon was up and lit a few drifting clouds. Not far down the slope were three palm trees with graceful boles and plumes silvered by moonlight. Much further down were pink lights and luminescent-blue tent tops of other camps, and beyond cliffs at the shoreline a wide silver swath of moonlight sparkled on the

water. Real moonshine, Willy thought. The road home. And he knew he must be drunk if Saipan's moonlight made him stop to admire it.

He went back into the tent grinning, but Leeper sat with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, staring at the floor.

"Now what's wrong?" Willy said as he dug out another can of beer.

"Oh, I been thinking of all the guys who died, Andy."

"Forget 'em. Forget everything tonight, Bony."

"But we shouldn't." Leeper stared at his foot, frowning. "They were our buddies, and I especially can't forget Chick and Bonelli."

"God, Bony. How many times did Bonelli want to bet you which one would piss on the other one's grave?"

Leeper went white.

"Don't joke about it, Andy. I know we used to, but it isn't funny any more. You ought to respect the souls of the dead."

"There aren't any souls." Willy picked up Leeper's half-finished can of beer from the deck and shoved it into his hand. "To Chick and Bonelli," he said. "The best in the outfit after Salty."

Leeper started to drink the toast, but a couple of gunshots sounded in the distance. He jumped and listened to a clatter of hoofbeats.

"What's that?" he said.

"The movie, Bony. The movie, for god's sake." Willy laughed and shook his head. Leeper took a short swallow of beer.

"Anyway, Andy, those guys didn't deserve to die. We shouldn't be enjoying ourselves as if nothing had happened."

"We don't enjoy ourselves very often."

"I know. But we're still here. Why should we still be alive?"

"Because we're luckier—or unluckier. Keerist, Bony. Somebody has to live through it. But we aren't home yet by a long shot."

"Do you think we'll get rotated before Japan?"

"Hell no. Salty told me once we'd be in the fight for Tokyo, but I didn't believe it. Now I believe him about a lot of things."

"Actually I'm afraid to go home," Leeper said. "I never told anyone before, but I'd be ashamed to. I keep thinking how people

will act like I'm a big hero,⁴ but I'll know I cracked up and wasn't worth a damn. I've tried to figure out a way to go back to New Zealand, except it'd be pretty much the same. It's almost as bad to go home as to go to Japan."

"What kind of talk is that?" Willy was losing ground by it. He dug two full cans of beer from Leeper's sea bag. He opened them, took the near-empty from Leeper, swished it around to make sure the beer was mostly gone, then tossed it toward the other empties outside. He aimed badly and hit a mess kit on the stringer. He giggled, then put a full can in each of Leeper's hands. "Now chug-a-lug those, Bony. Please."

Leeper obediently drank a little from each can.

"No, no. Like this." Willy tried to empty his can without a pause, but he was too full. Beer ran out his mouth and down his throat and chest. He had to stop or choke to death.

"Whoosh," he said, wiping his face. "I'm waterlogged." He looked around the tent. It appeared to be filled with an improbable fluid instead of light. Solid objects were slightly distorted as if seen through something denser than air. "But I think I'm getting looped."

"I'm glad, Andy. Drink some of mine while I go to the head."

Leeper went out and apparently went clear to the head, because he was gone a long time. Willy did not mind. He opened two more cans of his own beer and lay back on his sack for luxury. He poured his mouth full of beer from one can and then the other, swallowing slowly but steadily, determined to keep on till it ran out his ears and he had achieved either total forgetfulness or wild inspiration. So far it was mostly superficial drunkenness, a thing of reflexes, but after Leeper returned he was barely aware of him except as a dim presence making quiet conversation and remaining perfectly sober.

When Willy sat up again his head reeled. He squeezed his eyes shut until the sensation passed, then let out a whoop and slapped Leeper's knee. He had lost all track of time and circumstances. He was not even sure for a moment of where he was and went outside to check up and get rid of some more beer. Afterward he

saw empty cans in the moonlight and sank down on his hands and knees to count them. He counted them several times but was confused by the total, since some of them were Leeper's. He went back inside and emptied his sea bag onto his cot. There were seven unopened cans left.

"Is the movie nearly over?" he asked.

"I haven't paid much attention, Andy."

"We better not take any chances anyway, Commodore."

He knew Bony was not drunk, but that was a lost cause. He pushed his cot aside, put one can of beer back in his sea bag for morning, opened the other six cans, and sat down on the deck with them lined up in front of him. Every move required intense concentration, but whenever he muffed a move he laughed.

"You're tight as a tick," Leeper said with a faraway smile.

"Not tight enough." Willy drank from each of the six cans in turn. The plywood deck had become uneven, and sometimes he missed a can he was reaching for or tipped one over in setting it down. And he was so swollen with beer now that he could only drink in sips, but drinking itself had become more or less irrelevant. What really mattered was the methodical pursuit of elusive cans on a shifty surface.

"If I felt like this all the time," he said in the middle of something Leeper was saying, "I think I could stand Saipan. Some guys say they wouldn't mind being here in peacetime, but I hate this island so much its name makes my ears ache. Honest, Bony—Admiral. They say it's pretty nice since DDT killed off flies and mosquitoes, but I can't forget those days in the mud. Remember how it looked when you came back from the hospital the first time? We lived in holes and there were only tents for officers. That's Saipan to me. That'll always be Saipan to me."

"It's the night up by Marpi Point to me," Leeper said. He sounded disembodied, like the sound track from the movie. Yet the drunker you got the better you liked him. "Remember the night I cracked up, Andy?"

"Sure. I thought you'd had it, Bony. I heard the grenade go off and thought Brother!" He smacked his hands together to make

the explosion, then swung his hands wide to indicate the effect. "That's right in old Bony's hole. I thought I'd find you dead as a doornail when I crawled over, except you were cryin'." He was not sure he should have mentioned the crying, so he reached for a beer. "Here's to the night you cracked up, mate." He tried to drink a big toast but choked on a laugh in the middle of it. He remembered the passwords they had used that night—Maggie and Jiggs, Blondie and Dagwood—comic strip names, for chris-sake. He spilled quite a bit of beer down his front, then had to concentrate on not laughing while he wiped his bare chest and stomach with the dry tail of his dungaree blouse. He did not want old Bony to think he was laughing at him.

"I really thought I was dead," old Bony was saying. It sounded as though his voice came from a loud-speaker on a high post outside. He was actually sitting on his cot, but it was too awkward for Willy to lean back and look up at him. "See, Andy, I felt the grenade go off in front of me, then I couldn't tell what had happened. I didn't hear guns any more, and I couldn't even feel my own face. I thought I was dead with my face blown off. It seemed as if I could see a body with a head but no face, and I figured I was my own soul seeing my own dead body."

"Holy cow," Willy said. Bony's talk was sort of weird, yet it made sense. Willy touched his own face and could hardly feel his fingers against it. He pinched his cheek and upper lip, and they were numb. He knew just what Bony meant.

"So I felt sorry for myself about getting killed," old Bony's far-away voice explained. "That's why I started to cry. Because if I was dead I wanted Chick or Bonelli or Lt. Coble or somebody to be around. But I was all alone. I was afraid being dead meant being all alone, so I started to cry and couldn't stop."

"You were cryin' when I found you, and still cryin' when the corpsmen took you away," Willy said. It was nice to have a logical explanation for it at last. He slapped old Bony's leg appreciatively, then tried to decide which can of beer was due to be drunk out of next.

"Of course I didn't know about you and the corpsmen, Andy.

As far as I was concerned I was dead⁴ for days. The funny part of it is I still feel that way sometimes. I never told this to any of the doctors, but I'd just as soon be dead like that."

"I'd rather be dead drunk," Willy said.

"Well, it wouldn't be so hard to die if it was quick." Leeper's words were getting less distinguishable, yet it was nice for him to be getting them out of his system. Maybe old Bony had been as saturated with trapped words as Willy now was with beer. "Then you wouldn't have to worry about being afraid and going home and not having a girl and all. Because I hate to cause trouble, Andy, but I'm always in trouble alive. My dad never liked anything I did at home. The only time he was ever proud of me was when I joined the Marine Corps. And look how that turned out."

"It was a sad day when we enlisted, all right, all right."

"Oh, I thought it was great then, Andy. It'll make a man out of you, my dad said. And I thought the Marine Corps was nothing but crap games and poker and stuff. I didn't think about combat. I guess it never occurred to me we'd actually get in it, and then Tarawa hit me so hard I never got over it. It seemed like I was still on my knees when Saipan hit me and knocked me flat. Now the suspense is too much, waiting for Japan. It'd be worse than the others, and I'd rather die fast than have to put up with the landing and hiding and——."

"Oh hell," Willy said. "It'll come quick when it comes. If it comes. Gimme a hand, will you, Bony old boy, old Admiral." He held out his hands, and Bony pulled him to his feet. But he pulled too hard, and Willy wound up sprawled against him with their faces a few inches apart. It was the first time he had seen Bony's face so clearly for a long time, and it was startling. The eyes had no depth to them. They were flat and blank like a dog's. They had no humor or perception or liveliness. They shifted as soon as Willy's eyes focused on them. The rest of the face formed a smile at Willy's clumsiness, yet there was no warmth to it either. The whole thing was merely a mask that reminded you of Bruno K. Leeper. You were afraid to ask where the real Bruno K. Leeper had gone.

Very carefully Willy pushed himself up and turned to the entry. "Watch my beer," he said. "My teeth're floatin' again."

He went to the head that time, because he wanted to get away for a while from that close look at Bony. He staggered down the path feeling drunker in motion than he had sitting still, yet suddenly there was no joy to it—only a sort of soddenness.

And suddenly sirens were wailing in the night. First he heard a solo in the distance at the airfield and thought it was the movie. Then sirens of other camps joined in one by one until a terrible off-key chorus of them filled the air. By the time he reached the head the battalion siren had also started, but it had been so long since the last air raid that he did not understand the noise at all.

5

Leeper knew immediately what it was. As soon as the first siren began he ran to the tent entrance and stared at the sky. A heavy cloud was drifting in from the west, but the moon in the east still shone. The wail of sirens came closer and closer as one after another joined in at different pitches and durations in different locations, with the battalion siren finally rising to dominate the whole eerie hubbub. Then Leeper thought planes were headed straight for him, and he panicked.

"Willy!" he called. But he was alone.

He started to run toward the dispersal area, then stopped. He did not want to run any more. He had been running ever since New Zealand, and he was tired of it. Wherever you ran there was more fear and more waiting. You would not be free until truly alone in a quiet dark world you had discovered one night at Marpi Point. As he stood in the company street listening for planes he saw lights go off by blocks in camps below. He could not face darkness on Saipan even once more with the enemy around.

So he went back into the tent. Its light was still on, and among gear on the stringers he saw Gosse's .45. That was better than his own carbine. He had considered it often while lying on his sack

dreading many things, and it would be over so quickly, so easily.

But before he reached the pistol every light in the battalion area went out as the generator was shut off. For a moment he thought final darkness had already overtaken him, and he anticipated the release of his soul. But a shrill wail of sirens continued; this was no silent peace of death. Panic built up again. Soon enemy planes would drop shattering bombs, and he could not bear to wait for their haphazard violence. The end would come anyway, and it might as well be cleaner than poor Bonelli's destruction.

He groped for the pistol, took it from the leather holster, and took a magazine of ammunition from the carrier on the web belt. He slipped the magazine into the weapon, then hurried outside. Rows of tents hemmed him in, and a few men coming leisurely through moonlight threatened his determination. He started running toward the head, because the path led downhill naturally in that direction. When he saw Willy's silhouette at the end of the path he stopped. He thought Willy was watching him, and he resented Willy's interference too. Willy would scold him and say everything was all right and make him go to the dispersal area. Suspense would drag on and on to Japan, intolerably.

But he saw that Willy was not watching him. He was faced the other way after all, and Leeper tiptoed to the right. He passed a flanking row of tents without Willy's hearing him, then ran down an open hillside into a gully separating the battalion area from a tangle of jungle on the opposite slope. At the bottom he stumbled and fell. He sobbed as the wind was knocked out of him, then lay still, panting.

He had no more strength. He should get farther away, but the battalion siren seemed to pin him down with its clear thin shriek. And already he was beyond the safe boundaries of camp. A hidden Jap might rush out to knife him now. Planes might be overhead this very minute with bombs dropping. He swung around and looked up into a dark cloud. There was no use trying to hide from them. You only died by inches that way. If they did not get

you tonight they would get ybu some other time, so why not go fast? Why wait?

Abruptly he sat up, cocked the pistol, put the muzzle into his dry mouth, and with both hands gripping the receiver shot himself dead.

6

Willy heard the shot. He did not know what caused it, but he knew it was real and impermissible. Maybe the few remaining Japs on the island were staging a raid, which might account for the sirens and blackout too. He had watched lights go out down below, and now the whole island was dark except for moonlight. But even moonlight was nearly gone. That single cloud overhead had covered the moon itself and left just a trailing reflection on the water eastward.

Then it began to rain. It started as usual for no apparent reason, with no drop in temperature or rising wind or crash of thunder. Rain simply began to fall heavily and without a trace of freshness. And all at once he was furious at weather, blackout, sirens, everything conspiring to ruin his celebration.

Well to hell with that noise. He turned and ran through the rain toward his tent, not caring whether the Imperial Marines had landed or the whole Jap Air Corps was boring in for a major raid. He had more beer to drink and was going to drink it in spite of difficulties.

"Leeper," he said at the entrance to the dark tent.

There was no answer. He figured Bony had already hidden, and the other men had gone wherever they had gone from the amphitheater. None of that mattered anyway. He tripped on the step up into the tent and crawled on his hands and knees toward his beer. Sirens had stopped, and the only sound was rain drumming harder and harder on the tent. He was soaked to the skin and panting from his run up the hill, but all he wanted was that beer. His hand touched a can, then one by one he gathered six nearly

full cans into his arms. He could not drink them there because the Sergeant of the Guard might come to check for stragglers, and he hurried to find even Leeper's opened cans. When he had them he got to his feet, stumbled outside, and slipped and slid in mud down the hillside to the three palms he had seen earlier by moonlight.

They were dark now. Even the reflection of the moon on water was almost obscured by the cloud and falling rain. He had forgotten to bring his poncho, but that was not important either. He knelt in mud at the foot of the center tree, unloaded beer from his arms, and began drinking. He felt drunker than ever after his exertion, but the total drunkenness he craved had not been accomplished. He held a can of beer in each hand, closed his eyes against the splash of warm rain, and drank all of one can. He gasped, then started drinking the other. As much of it ran down his front as went inside him, but when it was gone he threw both empty cans away and reached for two more.

In the middle of the fourth can he choked on sudden laughter. He sank back on his heels half strangled, his head swimming, while hysterical spasms of soundless laughter shook him. He did not know why he laughed. Maybe at his persistence, maybe at the ridiculous failure of his party, maybe at nothing. But he seemed hysterically pleased by something, so he let himself laugh and drank when he could.

He finished the fourth can of beer and blindly found two more. His stomach was distended and protesting. He no longer knew whether any beer went inside him, so much of it ran down his chin and chest to mingle with the rain. Yet he kept on alternately laughing and drinking until those two cans were emptied and the final two were held tightly in his hands. He drank from one until his throat ached and his eyes bulged and his heart pounded from holding his breath. Then he sank forward weakly until he rested on his elbows and knees, sodden with beer. Gradually he slipped forward, gasping and sobbing, until his legs slid from under him and he lay prostrate with one cheek in the mud.

Rain beat down on his back, and the last two cans of beer

were clutched in his hands beside his head. Involuntary spasms of laughter continued to shake him, but after a while he realized it was not laughter at all. It was crying. He had no idea when that had started, but he was crying openly and without any desire to stop, the sound of it lost in the splash of rain. He was shedding genuine tears for the first time in ten years or more, and it was a greater relief somehow than real laughter had ever been.

He cried for nothing specific but with a feeling that he had a perfect right to cry. He had not done it earlier for Salty or Judy or anything else, yet now in the rain he did it for all those things and much more besides. It was such a wet night, such a sorry celebration for two years overseas. He clung to the beer cans in his hands as though clinging to the last fragments of a dissolving world, and he still clung to them when they found him after the rain had stopped and long after he had cried himself to sleep.

7

Leeper's funeral was held the next day. Unrefrigerated bodies do not keep in the tropics, and Saipan had no morgue. Private Willy rode in the second of two six-by-sixes taking the platoon to the cemetery. The battalion radio jeep followed with Lt. McGhee and Captain Bean. He stared past their trailing faces with nausea, yet watching the vertiginous recession of highway was less nauseating than closing his eyes. Either way the heat and motion and exhaust of the trucks were almost more than his hang-over could take.

He had been awakened hung-over to face questions and accusations at an inquest by Captain Bean. He seemed to be charged with Leeper's death as he had been charged with the death of Salty, although Doc Frechette testified that suicide was the only possible verdict in Leeper's case. He told the Captain how often he had tried to get Leeper evacuated so that nothing like this would happen, but the Captain kept turning to Willy and insisting that since he had been the last person to see Leeper alive he must in some way be responsible for the shooting. And when Willy had dredged up as much as he could remember of Leeper's last

conversation, he did feel a measure of guilt for having failed to understand when it might have counted. Yet no one could be utterly his brother's keeper, and he felt no sorrow. He had expended all that in the rain last night. When Captain Bean finally released him to go put on fresh khaki for the funeral he felt mainly a compact hatred for this man who persecuted him for things that were not quite his fault.

Accusing oyster eyes seemed to have been following him forever. I could kill him, Willy thought, and feel no guilt whatsoever. I've seen so much unjustified death that his would be a pleasure. He stared past the captain's head in loathing as trucks climbed the ridge above the island commander's headquarters and descended to Tanapag Harbor where water lay starkly blue and shipless. They went through Garapan, which had become row on row of corrugated Quonset huts, and passed neat little farms of captive civilians to the cemetery beyond Charan Kanoa where he and Salty had once driven with six corpses and a protesting Swede.

White crosses in the sun dazzled Willy's eyes like a picket fence. He climbed from the truck and sat down quickly in its shade. With or without his help Leeper had been brought to this—an attenuation of sameness fixed in thin white crosses that appeared as shrill as the sound of air-raid sirens. The other men stood by without facing that visible shrillness while Captain Bean stepped forward to shake hands with the chaplain in khaki who had been waiting for them.

"Where's the body?" the chaplain asked after the courtesies.

The captain looked dumbfounded. "Isn't it here?" he said.

"I understood you'd bring it," the chaplain told him.

"It was at the army hospital, Padre. Don't they deliver it?"

"Not unless they have specific orders from competent authority."

"Well for the love of——"

The men shuffled restlessly. Sweat gathered in oily drops on the coarse skin of Captain Bean's face. During an embarrassed silence Gosse came over and sat down in the shade of the truck beside Willy.

"Let's bury Bean and get done with it," he said.

"He wouldn't stay buried," Willy said. Poor Leeper, he thought. He wanted to trouble no one, but he should have known the captain would foul it up like a Chinese fire drill. Why didn't God fix it so bodies just evaporate when they die?

"Perhaps," the chaplain said finally, "we'd save time by phoning your outfit to have them type a release and bring the body down."

The captain frowned as though that were a radical suggestion.

"Well," he said. "Where's your phone, Padre?"

"Sir," the jeep driver said, "this jeep radio might be faster."

The captain glanced at him in annoyance.

"If you're authorized to communicate, go ahead."

The driver climbed into the narrow back seat of the jeep, set the radio switches, and picked up earphones. Captain Bean decided to write a message for relay and kept the driver waiting until the wording suited him exactly. Everyone watched when the driver adjusted the earphones at last and got ready to send. He did not send, however. He sat there with one hand extended toward the transmitter switch and a look of amazement blanking out the normal intelligence of his expression. He was listening to something in the earphones.

"Go ahead, lad," the captain said impatiently.

"Listen," the driver said. Captain Bean accepted the enlisted man's order because of its sharpness. Even men who had drifted away from the jeep and trucks came closer out of curiosity. Everyone listened as if to pick up with naked ears what the driver heard on the radio.

"Jesus Christ," he said a moment later. He said it with such complete awe that even the chaplain did not glance away from him.

"What's going on?" Captain Bean asked.

"They talk like the war's over," the driver said.

The sickening throb in Private Willy's head paused between two beats as though suddenly anesthetized. Gosse jumped to his feet.

"What?" Captain Bean said. "Who says so?"

"Listen," the driver told him. There was another interval of intense silence, the whole platoon except Private Willy now gathered around the radio jeep. Blank amazement on the driver's face began to show a dazed fraction of smile as he listened to his private voices.

"Come on," the captain said. "What is it?"

"No kidding." The driver lifted his earphones briefly. "They're all excited at Regiment. They say we knocked out a whole Jap city yesterday with one bomb. They talk like it's the real McCoy, and that blackout last night was in case of retaliation when the bomber came home. They say President Truman called it an Atom Bomb."

The hiatus of pain in Private Willy's head ceased. He had almost believed it until the driver said Atom Bomb, then he knew it was pure fantasy. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for a new stab of pain in his head to ease and his stomach to settle. When he opened his eyes once more Leeper's funeral had become a crazy charade unrelated to his futile death and missing body.

He saw the chaplain and captain and Lt. McGhee talking to one another with dazed smiles like the driver's. He saw Campbell and Duncan hugging each other while Gosse frowned at them silently. He saw Grbac shuffling aimlessly back and forth at the edge of the excited group, and everyone still spoke softly although Leeper had been forgotten. They all seemed to believe this fantastic scuttlebutt that could not possibly be true.

Because it had been going on too long to stop now. He did not even want it to stop since he had lost everything worth having it stop for—friends, love, home, hope. He had shed final tears for them last night in the rain, and today he was rededicated to combat and suffering. You cannot change that at will. Hatred is not turned on and off with a flick of the switch. One bomb will not end years of savagery. For twenty-five slow-passing months overseas he had been accumulating bitterness inside himself as a stalactite inside a cave accumulates substance from a slow-freezing drip. Now the substance was there, and it could not be wished away.

"It's over, Willy," Lt. McGhee said, standing above him. "It must be. Those Nips can't fight Atom Bombs."

"Where's the funeral, Lieutenant?" Willy asked. "Don't they have any respect for a poor bastard who'll never know it's over?"

Lt. McGhee's dazed smile faded.

"I'm sorry." He turned back toward Captain Bean.

Don't worry, Bony, Willy told himself as his fingers dug into dust that last night had been mud. It isn't over. They owe us some personal satisfaction first, so I won't quit. I'll find a way to pay back somebody for driving you to it.

chapter 12

1

At dawn the coast of Kyushu lay off the starboard in clouds, but by mid-morning when the convoy reached the outer harbor of Nagasaki clouds had lifted. Ships held a precise formation until they cut their engines and drifted out of line. Then it was possible to catch a glimpse of disconcerting beauty in miniature hills along the coast—carefully contoured rice fields, tiny evergreens, graceful roofs of waved tile. There was no sign of the Atom Bomb or people. By early afternoon troops were starting ashore in combat groups with plenty of ammunition.

Corporal Gosse and Private Willy stood shoulder to shoulder in the prow of a Higgins boat, braced against a slap of waves tossing spray in over them. They stood erect but ready to duck. No landing in the enemy's homeland was likely to go unopposed, no matter what papers had been signed three weeks ago. This was Japan. It was said to have two million unbeaten soldiers mustered among sixty-nine million other people who did not want to be conquered. Entering it was bound to be stormy. Even Sergeant Barnard kept his head low above the gunwale as he peered shoreward. Gun batteries might protest at any moment now.

"Look," Duncan said. He grabbed Private Willy's elbow and pointed to a pair of corpses bobbing on choppy gray water in the wake of boats ahead. One was a woman floating on her back, arms outspread and stiffened upward. A man floated face down, buttocks bloated grotesquely.

"Corpses always float that way," Gosse told Duncan. He leaned in front of Willy to make himself heard above the roar of motors and splash of water. "Women up, men down. I've seen lots of 'em."

But Duncan had never seen such a sight. He pulled himself out over the gunwale and was very sick. Willy held the seat of his pants and remembered how Leeper had been sick going ashore at Tarawa. He was glad to see these dead Japs. They had started this slaughter at Pearl Harbor.

"I hope they're all that dead," he told Gosse.

"Not a chance," Gosse said.

Duncan sat down behind them and did not watch the invasion any more. When they entered the main harbor friendly destroyers were strung out in formidable array beside sunken Jap ships. At the foot of steep hills on the port side you could see the first serious damage—gaunt rusty frames of a wrecked shipyard. You did not know whether it was Atom Bomb or conventional damage, but you were getting closer.

An outbound escort carrier passed. On its flight deck were groups of men listening to a band and watching the small boats go by.

"Must be prisoners of war going stateside," Gosse yelled in Willy's ear. Some incoming men waved to the men on the carrier, but Willy did not. So maybe a few had been saved and would go home. Lt. McGhee had already gone stateside on points for dependents. But the city of the second Atom Bomb had to be occupied in force, and anything could happen yet.

Then Willy saw live Japs on the shore. They were squatted along a rocky spit of land in front of a stone sea wall, searching through loose stones for food. They avoided looking up at boatloads of arriving invaders. Willy grew tense and nudged Gosse.

"Why don't we start shooting?" he said.

Gosse looked sullen and puzzled.

"Maybe they really did give up, for chrissake."

"No," Willy said. "They hate marines most. They'll fight us."

The boats slowed down. With motors almost idling they moved smoothly up the long bay. On the starboard shore stood many buildings—flimsy wooden houses and warehouses overloaded with heavy tile roofs. But for all the talk of an Atom Bomb they did still stand, and back among the trees hung a limp Chinese flag. With no breeze waving it the flag hardly looked victorious, yet how could a Chinese flag hang here with impunity? Maybe it was a trick. Deceit and persistence were the best-known Jap traits, and you had no reason to expect an overnight change. When this handful of foreigners was ashore and surrounded in darkness, an attack would surely begin. It would have every chance of success, and Private Willy felt certain of his unended war. He even felt the involuntary fear of it that he had felt offshore at Tarawa, Saipan, Tinian, and Okinawa.

Then they began landing. They did not have to wade. Captain Bean led his company onto a wooden wharf that sloped into the water, and men climbed from boats without wetting their feet. They formed a double file and moved into a crooked narrow street that was both drably common and strangely oriental. The city had not been leveled as reports claimed, yet at the first intersection a building had somehow collapsed. They waited there for the battalion to form in marching order, and already the city's silence drowned out the roar of boat motors on the bay.

They waited so long in silence that it became unbearable. Not even at a distance were shots being fired.

"Where is everybody?" Willy whispered.

"In the hills," Gosse said. "It'll be guerrilla fighting."

Because you knew this could not be victory. True conquest must be loud and certain. Here you felt hidden fanatic eyes drawing a bead on you along gun muzzles aimed from crannies and shadows. The whole battalion grew so quiet and apprehensive that even officers giving orders walked back among the ranks and spoke softly.

When they moved again it was only around a corner into another narrow street. Wholesale damage was more evident there—downed wires, splintered glass, fallen tiles, scattered straw mats and sacking. Yet drab buildings seemed basically intact—a poor testimonial for the Bomb. Damp air smelled of rotting grain, wrecked creature comforts, urine, and an eternity of night soil, but Willy's nostrils had been prepared for the stench of thousands of dead. He had expected the flattened wreckage of a larger Garapan, and this was not it. This was simply a damaged part of Honolulu, or Wellington, or possibly Spokane. This was dangerous. No enemy stood against a wall with his hands above his head. No enemy lay crushed and bleeding at your feet. It felt like a trap, a trap that would be devastating when sprung.

Gosse lit a cigarette and hoisted himself onto an unpainted metal drum in front of a building with boarded windows. Willy also lit a cigarette but remained standing at the edge of the street, watching.

The air suddenly bristled. He felt increased tension before he saw a bandy-legged little Jap policeman in black uniform coming from the entrance of the building with boarded windows. The Jap walked stiffly toward Gosse, holding the swing of his sword scabbard away from his legs and carrying in his other hand a single sheet of paper. Gosse jumped from the metal drum and raised his hand to the holster of his .45. Willy dropped his cigarette and reached for the BAR propped against his legs. At last a fuse was burning into powder. At last an explosion would free them of this unnatural truce and silent waiting.

Attentively, as though alone, the policeman stepped behind Gosse. On the wall of the building above the metal drum he pasted a hand-lettered sign: "Care, gasoline." He turned and went back inside.

Campbell snickered.

"How about that?" he said. "Some invasion, eh?"

A rattle on the opposite rooftop drew their attention upward. Another little Jap with a rag tied around his head ran barefoot and bare-legged along the ridge of a second-story roof. He car-

ried not a rifle but a wooden bucket of mud and a bundle of tiles held in a sling of straw rope. He set his burden down, squatted, and began to mend the roof. A ripple of discussion broke out in the column of marines. Private Willy lowered his BAR to the ground, dismayed.

He was not ready for Peace. This was no way to end a war. This was no proper conclusion for twenty-six months of hate and fear and filth on stinking deadly islands. When word of actual surrender had come to Saipan one night after taps, Willy had heard a few childish whoops and hollers, but no wild rejoicing. It had appeared that marines at least would not quit fighting. They continued to train without a pause. The day after V-J day, on their way to climb Mount Tapotchau, Lt. McGhee's platoon heard commentaries about unconditional surrender brayed from loud-speakers in an army camp. It sounded like mere army foolishness. Unconditional surrender did not concern Gosse and Willy and the Fleet Marine Force in the Field. When operation plans were issued for a full combat landing in Japan, continued strife seemed assured. Japanese resentment of the Atom Bomb practically guaranteed it.

Yet here no one was cooperating. Once the ice had been broken more Jap policemen began to come and go from the boarded headquarters, none of them quite appearing to recognize foreign troops in the street. But one officer did herd before him a wrinkled old woman with a bowed head, as if to demonstrate that a civil population was being controlled for this bloodless invasion. The Atom Bomb had by no means depopulated Nagasaki, and Willy swore to himself. The Bomb was a fake. The whole war had been an illusion of some insane sort, yet he could not convert himself to Peace just because someone thought the time had come to start mending roofs and posting safety slogans like "Care, gasoline."

When they finally marched on through the quiet city it was nearly evening and threatening rain. They passed narrow-gauge tracks running through an alley that looked too tight for even a small trolley, then entered a wide thoroughfare strung with broken overhead power lines. They saw larger buildings of reinforced

concrete, undamaged except for boarded windows. They moved steadily into lesser damage as they marched back along the bay in the direction from which they had come ashore, and all at once beside hushed buildings they saw American Negroes lounging against the cabs of American army trucks.

The column of marines halted again, as if collectively shocked by the sight of army Negroes. The army never preceded marines ashore, but they especially did not belong here—those black men forcibly transplanted from Africa a century ago and now misplaced again to the land of yellow men. They seemed a symbol of long historic outrage. Surely white men had reached the limit of unspeakable enterprises here where an Atom Bomb had supposedly fallen and sons of slaves were asked to help pick up the pieces. Vengeance by both blacks and yellows must have come due, and Willy felt hopelessly confused by a sense of guilt and uncertainty and animal grudge.

"Not jigaboos," he heard Gosse say. "It's bad enough to have the army ahead of the marines without they should be niggers."

He was glad Gosse was with him. Gosse had not lost the hatred. If you did not understand what went on you could at least hate something to represent your troubles—Japs, niggers, Captain Bean. Gosse was better at that than Salty or Lt. McGhee or anyone else who had started with you but for one reason or another had not seen this thing through. From New Zealand on Gosse had endured while men without hate died—Flynn, Klein, Fischer, Bonelli, Leeper, Jones—until you wondered if tenacity alone did not outweigh all other qualities.

Then beyond parked army trucks a Japanese truck approached. It was like ones captured on Saipan, a clear reminder of strain and exhaustion and sick fear that brought you here. It drove slowly down the street on the left-hand side until its passage was stopped by the jam of American trucks and halted troops. Crouched on the truck-bed were a dozen young Jap men who could have been soldiers. Their eyes were not evasive like those of the policemen. They were black remnants of mutual loathing from Tarawa's sands and Saipan's hills. They belonged to the same fanatics you had

faced in caves and bunkers and foxholes, and here was a chance to conclude an enmity left dangling. ¹

Private Willy gripped his BAR strap. He heard Gosse inhale until he must have been suffocated with air. Marines grew so taut that one command or one false move would have set them firing with brutal satisfaction. Dark eyes of Negroes absorbed the situation without expression. You could not tell what they would do when the shooting began, but unarmed Japs stared at marines with despising.

Then Gosse expelled breath and words explosively.

"Youmotherrappingsabitches!"

Every Jap shifted his eyes to Gosse. Every marine waited for a return challenge. As soon as the first shot was fired you knew the entire street would come alive with firing from hidden sources.

But one Jap laughed. It was a nervous falsetto, yet it was a laugh. The other Japs looked startled, then one of them giggled at his companion. Then a marine laughed, and suddenly tension vanished. More marines shouted obscenities at the conquered, all the Japs laughed at this foreign language, and months of stink and mud and flies in the Pacific were lumped again into dissatisfied bitterness.

They marched on into dusk and smaller streets. From the bay they heard American jazz played over a ship's loud-speakers. It was briefly interrupted by a mournful tweet of boatswain's pipes, bringing quick nostalgia for the blowers and safety and comfort of shipboard. When they stopped to eat at the end of a bridge their own chow was a chocolate D ration from their packs, and the first taste of it reminded Private Willy of dengue on Tinian, killing his appetite.

A few street lights came on. Beneath one at the end of the bridge stood another policeman carefully looking over the heads of marines. The bridge spanned a canal or estuary, and Gosse sat beside Willy on a stone wall above lapping dirty water. Gosse touched his arm and pointed to several wooden boats with preposterous wooden tillers and rudders. They were full of rusting scrap iron.

"Remember how we used to send 'em that junk?" Gosse said. He spit a mouthful of chocolate toward the closest boat. "It was a damn-fool trick for us to come in here on tiptoe today."

After chow they crossed the bridge and moved a hundred yards up a muddy road smelling of excrement. This time they stopped in a defile that hemmed them in uncomfortably. The air was damp and misty and colder than they were used to. Crickets made an unfamiliar and alien sound, but still no sound of shooting indicated battle anywhere.

"There's a cave over there," Gosse said. It had become so dark that you could not see his face. "A concrete cave in the bank."

"Tell it to the marines," Willy said irritably.

"Well if they don't put out security we'll be ambushed."

"Relax," Campbell said from somewhere. "Those cops are security."

A commotion on the road ahead made Willy tingle with his old habit of dread and expectation near Japs. Out of darkness he saw a wooden two-wheeled cart approach between shadows of waiting marines. A bowlegged Jap was pulling the cart, and on it lay something long like a corpse. Gosse took his pistol from its holster, but as the Jap passed you heard him panting in terror. You wondered who was more afraid of whom. And did people die naturally here among the ruins?

They began moving once more and followed a winding street solidly lined with dark silent houses. It was near the bay, because a smell of brackish filth was constant. Occasionally a crack of light showed from one of the houses, proving it inhabited, yet you did not know how these people could sit by and let the conqueror march past unmolested. Some of the shacks must contain danger, a reason for lingering fear. Where were the banzai cries of the hopelessly beaten on Saipan? Where were fanatics who fled to the hills and lived like animals rather than give up?

The marines moved inland on a street beside a little stream. Water ran between stone walls, and houses crowded its far bank with small bridges leading to them. Every available inch of earth seemed in use, and when there were no more houses ricefields

immediately crowded the road where wooded hills were not too steep. Crickets sang by the hundreds, amazingly cheerful, and the air grew fresher although never quite losing its everlasting smell of night soil.

They stopped at last beside a long high building braced by heavy beams in empty window frames on the ground floor. A single yellow bulb lit one room inside, and at a table under the light sat the flabby-faced battalion adjutant. The baby-faced lieutenant who had taken Lt. McGhee's place stepped in through a glassless window to talk to him. The adjutant quickly became exasperated and began to draw diagrams in his message book. The men watched from the muddy road and could not even sit down. They were tired now and expecting to dig in for the night before they could try to sleep a bit, but when Lieutenant Baby Face came out through the window he led them onto a street between rows of unlit buildings like the one in which the adjutant had been.

Then for the first time since leaving the states they were quartered in barracks instead of tents. There were no glass panes in the windows, no cots or mattresses, but neither were there patrols or illuminating shells or artillery barrages. They simply went into these strange buildings, found empty rooms, took their two blankets from their packs, rolled up in them, and went to sleep. Even Gosse and Willy slept.

2

A hint of autumn chilled the morning air, and after two years of summer it was hard to believe. Mist rising from the fields blew along hills whose ridges were lined with pines that looked like brush drawings. The landscape was as fragmentary, miniature, and beautiful as reproductions of those drawings in pre-invasion manuals—little hills, little vistas of canyon, little clumps of bamboo, little ricefields, and little people in little houses just beyond rows of barracks.

They had slept that close to the former enemy without incident,

and Willy felt as though he were being decompressed too abruptly. It seemed as if he had been submerged at a great depth in the sea for a long time and were reaching the surface too rapidly, causing bends.

As they went to breakfast Japs were going to their fields. Some men wore coolie hats; women wore baggy black drawers. Marine cooks had moved field ranges into a long shed during the night and heated C rations in the cans. There was also hot coffee, and officers and men sat together on the damp ground to stare at this unlikely peacetime camp.

Raised streets separated rows of two-story barracks topped by heavy tile roofs marked POW in large white letters. If the POW markings had been a ruse to keep the buildings from being damaged in air raids, they were damaged anyway. One had collapsed completely, a few were already braced, and all of them leaned away from town. It was the first time the Atom Bomb power had looking convincing. Scuttlebutt was that the explosion had occurred four or five miles away.

"Incidentally," Sgt. Barnard said. He sat erect and yogalike on a creek bank and spooned C rations from a can to his mouth. "You guys don't drink any water from the pipes in those buildings. There'll be plenty of boiled water here at the galley."

"How come?" Campbell said. "Can't our good old conquering systems take their water straight?"

"It's got fecal matter in it," Sgt. Barnard told him professionally.

"What were all those shots for?—cholera, plague, typhoid."

"They might've missed something. Just pass the word like I say."

"How about the heads, Sarge?" Duncan asked.

Campbell and Sgt. Barnard suddenly laughed.

"What's wrong with concrete straddle trenches?" Campbell said. Duncan blushed.

"I can't squat right."

"The carpenter's got orders to build stools this morning," Sgt. Barnard told him. "But it's a good thing you were never in combat. People squatted long before they decided to sit down."

"Jesus," Gosse said. "These crummy gooks. We'll have the whole lousy bunch around our necks all our lives."

"You wanta atomize everybody?" Campbell asked.

"Why not? They'd do it to us if they had a chance."

"Where did the bomb go off?" Willy asked the sergeant.

"Beyond where we came in. You'll see it soon enough."

"I don't want to see it," Gosse said.

"Why?" Duncan asked.

"Because it could sterilize a guy, that's why."

"Might keep you out of the clap shack," Campbell said.

"Oh, it's safe down there," Sgt. Barnard told them in his professional manner. "One of the jeep drivers heard they picked up a couple of drunk swabbies right in the middle of the bomb area last night after they raped a Jap gal and knifed her old man."

That's more like it, Willy thought. Bloody lusts should end it. How else can you tell you've won?

But after breakfast there were only routine police details. They hauled straw mats from the barracks and piled them onto smoldering fires. They swept and swabbed buildings and raked grounds around them as though Peace were Cleanliness. Kids in fascinated slant-eyed groups watched jeeps and marines. Women crept up to fires to salvage a rag, a mat, a scrap of wood. Then it was Willy who wanted to fling his helmet in sick loathing at someone, as Gosse had done on Hawaii. He remembered the drive across Tarawa to annihilate relatives of these present neighbors, nights of fearing sneak attacks on Saipan. Those were the conditions of his coming here, and he felt deceived with only a rake in his hands. He dropped it angrily.

"Why should we clean up Japan?" he said to Gosse. "If the war's over, let's get out of here. I've done my share, for chrissake."

Gosse looked at him with curiosity, his tight-skinned face pinched against smoke blown from burning straw.

"Don't you want to patrol them hills first?"

"Not if there's no fight."

"Who'd you like to kill most, Willy? Nips or Lard Face?"

"What's it to you?"

Gosse's eyes were small, bright, and suspicious.

"Nothin', only I got a hunch you'd rather plug the captain, after the way he poured it on about Leeper. I wouldn't've taken that from him on top of the Jones deal. He's screwed us all too much. For my money he's trigger bait, but I bet he's too chicken to make a combat patrol."

"You talk awful big, Gosse."

Gosse spit.

"I can act awful big too, Willy. Don't forget that, in case you ain't got the guts to pay off your own debts."

Next day they rode back over the route they had walked at night, going to unload gear. Rice had been cut in the fields and laid carefully stalk by stalk to dry. An old woman beside the road flailed a handful of it on a square of cloth, tossing it to the wind to separate chaff. Near her an old man in ragged breeches squatted to chop wood with a hand axe of rough iron fastened by thongs to a crude stick handle. You could hardly believe such primitiveness. Where were the precision-tooled shells of Saipan, the sleek planes that wrecked Pearl Harbor?

Streets at the edge of town looked narrower than ever by daylight. It seemed impossible for six-by-six trucks to squeeze through without flattening flimsy little houses or squashing dozens of bang-haired slant-eyed kids—kids with other kids strapped to their backs, holding out empty hands and yelling for candy or cigaretos. Where had they come from? Surely there was not room enough in those huts for them all to have hidden the night of the landing. Surely there were not women enough to bear them all in standard nine-month periods. Maybe they came in litters, like pups. It had been so long since Willy had observed kids closely that they were a sort of oddity—like women and old people. He had grown used to a world of young men. Other elements of a population looked peculiar and unnecessary.

Then in front of one house he saw a small boy with big solemn eyes and short black bangs of hair. The boy stood alone beneath a wooden frame in which tiny silver fish hung to dry. He had raised one finger beside his face in salute to the troops, and the sight of

him made Willy's throat ache. Dimly he remembered another small boy saluting a passing convoy! It seemed a lifetime ago and a world away. It had been in San Diego when a replacement outfit left on a voyage coded Epic 83-A. Had this been truly an epic, beginning and ending with a child's salute? What were little boys made of that they should feel sympathy for men of arms? Why did little boys develop an urge to use real rifles and cannons and Atom Bombs? Why had young Andrew Willy run away from his brother's farm in Hanford, Washington, to end up years later in Nagasaki where a crop of plutonium from that selfsame Hanford, so the radio said, had helped demonstrate a process called atomic fission?

You never knew what you were getting into when you started. If there was a scheme to things it got more and more obscure as you went along. Maybe Bony Leeper had had the right idea when he simply shot himself, yet if it came to that there must be better ways . . .

For most of the week Willy's platoon worked on the beach side by side with bowlegged little Japs who toted singly on their backs large boxes that marines packed in pairs. Afterward they did patrol the hills, but it was a waste of time. Lieutenant Baby Face took them out, and they merely made token searches through a few caves and outlying houses for weapons that might be used against them if this extraordinary occupation soured. They even found minor caches of swords and rifles, more abandoned than hidden, although the oriental mind could be baffling. On Saipan fugitive Japs had covered an army bulldozer with banana leaves one night, as if to hide something that could not be hidden. Maybe here too these caches were a stylized ritual of resistance, a formal procedure like tea-drinking. At any rate there were no last-ditch fights. The only casualty was Sgt. Barnard who blundered waist-deep into a cistern of night soil and returned to camp because of the smell.

And then they were given liberty. It seemed heretical, contrary to the very logic of arriving in Japan, yet one overcast day liberty trucks took them directly to the center of the least damaged section of town and turned them loose. Willy went with Gosse

and Duncan out of frustration. He resented the sight of Nagasaki's streets swarming with civilian pedestrians, yet marines from the trucks melted into the crowd as if it were a liberty in Wellington.

"Let's look for a whorehouse," Gosse said at the first corner.

"They're out of bounds," Willy reminded him.

"So what?"

"So I'm not gonna tangle with Bean over that."

"He'll never know. How about it, Duncan?"

"Oh." Duncan tried very hard to be indifferent. He shrugged three or four times as if imagining he could take women or leave them alone. Then he remembered being hooked by a wily one. "I'll stick with Willy."

Gosse walked away by himself, and Willy turned in the opposite direction down a quiet street, rather glad Duncan had not left him alone in this exotic land of an inhuman enemy. They came to heavier damage than they had seen yet. Many buildings were gone. Rubble lay everywhere, but in several places a patch of it had been cleared for a garden. What looked like radishes were already sprouting, and Willy wondered why the Japs had not stuck to their admirable ability as farmers.

A train whistled shrilly. Through an opening of collapsed buildings he saw a small station and the first train since New Zealand. Soldiers in uniform were getting off. Homecoming servicemen convinced him that the war had ended altogether, and somehow he hated them.

"Holy cow," Duncan said. "How'd you like to get discharged and come home to this lousy place?"

"Don't waste your sympathy."

"Well I'm not, Andy. But——"

"They asked for it."

"Sure. But after all——"

"Maybe there'll be a war with Russia before we get discharged."

"With Russia? They're our allies."

"For god's sake, don't you ever listen to the radio?"

"Yeah, but—holy cow. I've had enough of the Marine Corps."

"You never got a taste of the real Marine Corps."

"As much as I wanted. Are you gonna stay in, Andy?"

He had thought of staying in, if that decision had to be made. It was at least something familiar. It offered a vapid security of regular food, adequate clothing, spending money, and one of these weekly liberties. Without war the Marine Corps would be hardly more than a dormant organism waiting for another catastrophe, yet for men without a future it had appeal. Gosse and Sergeant Barnard and Captain Bean were staying in . . .

"They wouldn't have me," he said. "I earned three campaign ribbons, but nobody gives a damn. They keep score in camp, and in camp I've got two court-martials. If Bean had his way I'd have another for lettin' Leeper shoot himself. I put up with it for the duration and got kicked in the teeth all along, so now they can jam it."

He walked quickly on, tense and angry, until suddenly he stopped. In front of a ruined church lay a broken stone head of Christ. He had forgotten that Christianity had been here, but beyond the wrecked church was nothing. All buildings were gone. An expanse of rubble stretched away to the hills, and Willy felt his stomach go empty. In the center of a cleared roadway stood a marine MP, wearing a helmet inner-liner painted with a white band and circle. He had been posted at the edge of the Bomb area, and beyond him spread indiscriminate destruction.

Willy turned away, before recognition could sink in.

"What the hell kind of liberty is this?" he said. "Come on."

They followed another narrow street back toward the truck stop. Many standing buildings were boarded shut, but through an open doorway they saw two old men at work. One repaired a bicycle, the other hammered slowly at a worn copper kettle, as though two craftsmen from different ages had set up shop together. Next door was a dentist's office, identifiable by a battered chair and faint medicinal smell. Then there was a strange little place with a miniature tree growing from the floor inside. Willy stared at the tiny indoor garden until he became aware of a woman kneeling in shadow beside an open charcoal fire. She bowed. He drew back and bumped into Duncan.

"Isn't that pretty?" Duncan said.

"Move on, for god's sake. We're not peeping toms."

"But it's real interesting, Andy."

"Let's go back to camp."

"What for? We might as well see something."

Women in those typical baggy black drawers passed with bowed heads and long yellow roots of some kind under their arms. Refuse had been swept into neat piles. In a side street they both saw at the same time a woman squatting in the gutter to relieve herself while holding in front of her a baby relieving itself.

"For pete's sake," Duncan said. He was terribly embarrassed, but Willy was dismayed by such poverty. He hurried along to a wider street, but out there small kids began tagging behind them, saying Ohio and Konichiwah. When Duncan told them to go away they followed more closely. They were dirty, their noses ran, and several had sores on their shaven heads. Willy could not look at them.

He stepped aside for an approaching bicycle. The man on it wore a black suit, white shirt, and horn-rimmed glasses. He raised his hat to the marines. Duncan waved. The man promptly stopped, bowed, and said, "Good morning."

"Do you speak English?" Duncan asked with wide-eyed naïveté.

"Oh yes." The man smiled and bowed again. "Good morning."

"Well holy cow," Duncan said. "What do you think of this?"

"I speak some," the man said. "Missionary school."

"I mean about the Bomb and all?"

The toothy smile did not fade. The man held up one finger.

"One bomb." He swung his arm in a wide arc to indicate extent. Then he bowed once more, climbed onto his bicycle, and rode away.

"For the love of mike," Duncan said. "These guys are okay."

"Don't be so damned simple." Willy felt more and more irritated without knowing why. It had something to do with what was fitting and what was not, yet he no longer quite knew which was which.

They passed a movie theater being repaired. Next to it was a large department store where marines were entering and leaving, and Duncan wanted to go in. They found it cold and dirty. Plaster had cracked on walls and ceilings. Dusty showcases displayed odd wares—back-scratchers made of spools and buttons, cheap ornaments of mother-of-pearl, seashells with handles attached to make spoons. On one counter stood a sign in English: "Gentlemen from over the seas welcomed to Nagasaki. Peoples and merchants of the city offer interesting souvenirs in friendship." Beside the sign, leaning across the counter while a clerk with an abacus added his charges for a stack of brush drawings on gilt cardboard, was Captain Bean.

Willy stopped. He hated that man more than he had ever hated anyone. Captain Bean accused him of deliberately killing Salty Jones and allowing Leeper to commit suicide. Those accusations were responsible for a protracted sense of guilt and inferiority, and there could be no Peace while it lasted. If you were born bad you had might as well die bad, and Willy knew that if he had held a gun then he would have raised it and shot the captain in cold blood without hesitation.

As though feeling hostility like a draft on his neck, Captain Bean turned to see its source. His moist gray eyes met Willy's.

"Well, well, well." The captain straightened up and shifted the pipe in his mouth. "Our prize private hunting for mischief again?"

Willy stood rigidly silent, but Duncan fidgeted.

"Hello, sir," Duncan said. The captain did not look at him.

"Hope you don't expect to find the red-light district here."

"Oh nosir." Duncan sounded painfully flustered, but the captain paid no attention. His horsy lips nibbled the stem of his unlit pipe.

"Just be mighty careful," Captain Bean said. "Because anyone caught out of bounds will get the book thrown at him, believe me."

Abruptly Willy turned and left the store. He had to get away from there. He had to get away from Bean and Duncan and the desolate weight of Nagasaki's poverty and defeat. He had to be alone to fight for some sort of personal peace, and he did not care who was offended.

Outside it was sprinkling rain. He nearly ran into a little old man with a huge yellow umbrella. The whole street had sprouted bright paper umbrellas, but the yellow one blocked his passage completely. The old man beneath it bowed. His feet and legs were bare, but he bowed with great dignity and a fixed smile, time after time. My god, Willy thought. Am I the only one in Japan who still hates?

He finally went around the old man with the umbrella and hurried toward the street that ran along the bay to camp. A ferry was unloading at the wharf where he turned, and farther on he passed a group of people with round straw baskets buying fish from an open cart. The rain had quit, and he intended to walk to camp, but in a few minutes he heard a jeep behind him. He believed it must be Captain Bean coming to pick him up for insolence to an officer, and he stepped aside with his back to the road, his teeth set, his fists clenched. The jeep went by, then braked to a stop. When Willy looked, Doc Frechette was waving to him.

"Want a ride?" the doc called.

There was no way to refuse. He did not want the doc to think he needed a strait jacket, so he ran to the jeep and climbed into its back seat. Doc Frechette sat beside the driver in front, but as they started on he sociably turned sideways to talk with Willy.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Oh, not bad," Willy said. "Pretty sad liberty though."

"Did you get out to the target area?"

"Nosir. Not quite."

"Better see it, Willy. This part of town gives the wrong impression. Out there you realize what they mean by energy equals mass times the speed of light squared."

The driver glanced at the doctor as though he had spoken Chinese.

"Is radiation really what they say?" he asked.

"Not if you're worried about being unsexed." Frechette

laughed, then was serious again. "But if you mean direct radiation on the natives, it's another story. Some of them developed spot hemorrhages, lost their hair, stopped menstruating, that sort of thing. Those may be temporary effects, but of course we won't know the full story for years. This opens a brand new field of medical problems."

"Gives me the creeps," the driver said. "How many died, Doc?"

"Nobody knows. They're still dying."

"Holy mackerel."

"Oh, not many. Most fatalities occurred almost with the flash. That was a crowded area, and they say tens of thousands died immediately. Most deaths now are from indirect causes—infections and diseases. But any way you look at it, the thing is appalling."

"You can say that again," the driver said. But Willy did not feel appalled. You killed enemies by any means available, and that was that.

"It kept us from being killed," he said. "If we'd had to invade this place, there'd have been ten thousand dead marines."

"That's a point of course." Doc Frechette frowned. "And I guess the Germans killed more civilians with planned mass exterminations than both our big bombs." He shrugged. "But to weigh the dead against the possibly dead is hardly fair. I doubt if killing is fair in any case."

Willy wished he had kept on walking. The doctor's mild diagnostic gaze made him nervous. The conversation annoyed him.

"Anyhow it's over," he said.

"Pretty anxious to get home?"

"Not especially. I haven't really got one."

"I had a letter from Lt. McGhee. Sent his regards to you."

"Me?" Willy said. Lt. McGhee had already faded. On Saipan he had come to say good-bye the day he got stateside orders, yet it had not meant much. Everyone you liked went away. You only tried to forget.

"Yes," the doctor said. "He thought a lot of you fellows in his

original platoon and resented being rotated first. But it was probably best. He and the bottle were getting too buddy-buddy."

"Man," said the driver. "Wish I had that kind of a buddy."

Doc Frechette smiled but kept watching Willy.

"What are you planning to do now?"

"Do?" Willy said. Did his determination show?

"I mean after you get rotated, now that the war's over."

"Oh." Willy drew a long breath. "Haven't thought much about it."

"I suppose not. It must be very hard to realize there is a future since you've practically grown up without one. Even I feel lost, and I've had professional training and gone on practicing. But everyone winds up slightly abnormal after years of adjusting to abnormal situations. It's been a lousy war, Willy. Nothing will ever be the same again, although I'm fairly optimistic. I hope nothing will ever be worse."

Willy looked away from the doc's dry smile. He saw two Japanese men squatting beside the road in that impossible oriental position they maintained for hours. A flock of neat little girls from school, wearing identical black jumpers, their hair in identical sharp bangs, huddled aside to let the jeep pass. Nothing ever would be the same again, yet why should that cause optimism?

"You aren't suckin' the hind tit either, Doc," Willy said.

Frechette's face went blank. He examined Willy more carefully.

"No. And I don't think you are."

"They don't come any lower than a private with two court-martials."

"You'll outgrow those. One of them for sure didn't count."

"Some people think it did."

"Captain Bean? Don't let his type condition your life, Willy."

"My life isn't worth a plugged nickel."

"Oh crap. You're so young you don't recognize its value."

"What have I got, Doc? My friends are all dead, my family might as well be, and the girl I loved couldn't wait. I'm nobody with nothing. That's a lot to be optimistic about, isn't it?"

Boyishness had gone completely from Frechette's face, as though he had learned at last to look like a doctor. He looked very tired too, almost as tired as Willy felt.

"For god's sake don't crack up now," he said. "You're nearly out of the woods, Willy. A few weeks and you go stateside, then you'll get a new perspective on things. I know it's been rough, but you're smart enough to come out of it better than most. McGhee and I've been betting on you for a long time, so all your friends aren't dead. And the guys on the hind tit don't have whole bodies any more, or whole minds. You're way up front if you want to be. Just hang on."

"Sure, Doc, sure." Willy stuffed his hands in the pockets of his combat jacket. It was cold in the topless old jeep. "I'm okay."

"I hope so," the doc said. "I sure as hell hope so."

They let him out in front of his barracks, and he climbed the stairs to the second-floor room he shared with Gosse and Duncan and Campbell and Grbac, as he had shared a tent with them on Saipan. They were on liberty, but all their gear hung there like detachable excrescent pieces of them, ever present, everlasting. He went to the window and stared across a narrow courtyard to the next building. On its ground floor were sick bay and headquarters offices. On its second floor was the officers' wine mess. He could see the bar through the door leading off that opposite corridor in a direct line with his own window, and all at once he did not care what the doctor said. He could do it from here so easily.

Because I don't believe in stateside any more, he thought. I don't want to hang on. I'd rather even up the score for Salty and Leeper, then they can nail my hide to the wall.

4

"That miserable son of a bitch," said Pfc Gosse.

"You asked for it," Willy said without sympathy.

"But I didn't even get inside. Those MPs nabbed me before I

had a chance, and he didn't need to bust me. He coulda docked my pay, but he didn't need to yank my corporal stripes."

They had read Gosse off at the evening chow formation. Captain Bean had been his deck court officer and had thrown the book at him, but Gosse had no kick coming. The entire division had been warned about the red-light district.

"He only made another example of you," Willy told him.

"I'll kill the son of a bitch, so help me."

Gosse stepped to the window. Their roommates had gone to the movie. It was dark outside, and you could see very clearly into the lighted officers' bar across the way. You could almost make out pictures in a comic book the enlisted bartender was reading. But no officers were there.

"You wouldn't dare," Willy said.

"Don't think I wouldn't." Gosse turned, his tight-skinned face flushed and ugly. Willy remembered a night in Kealakekua when they had fought over a Jap civilian. Gosse's expression had been similar then—pig-eyed, snarling, irrational. He had been proud of his corporal's stripes and might resent their removal enough to kill. "You're the gutless one, Willy. You should've done it long ago."

Willy's hands tightened on the edge of his cot where he sat. He had been waiting every night since liberty to do it. He had stayed in his room every night to watch that opposite barroom, but if it was not Duncan hanging around it was Grbac. And the one night everybody had been gone from this building the captain had not shown up in the wine mess. Now it was Gosse.

"You never killed anyone," Willy said. "You fought the war from a safe distance too, like Bean. You never saw Salty and Bonelli die, or heard Leeper crack up, or rode a truckful of corpses to the cemetery. You don't know what killing is."

Gosse went white. He considered himself a complete veteran.

"You couldn't get out of it," he said. "I'll show you what it's like to do it on purpose. I'll plug the bastard from here."

"They'd crucify you."

"I'll say it was an accidental discharge."

"Nobody'd believe that."

"It happened with you and Salty, didn't it?"

"Not from this distance."

"They couldn't prove it was intentional."

"But you'd never hit him with your pistol."

"I'll use Duncan's rifle and say I didn't know it was loaded."

"You'd go to Mare Island anyhow."

"Not for long. It wouldn't be any worse than Saipan."

There was no question of Gosse's intent. He spoke with soft rabid intensity like gas escaping under pressure. Ever since New Zealand and the short hateful reign of Lt. Coble men had been talking of shooting officers in the back, yet as far as Willy knew it had never happened. In combat the hateful ones were never in front of you, or even near you, and too many other things had to be taken care of. Now there was nothing else to absorb your hate, and you had been taught to kill, and there was this enormous pressure of frustration and dissatisfaction with the sheer ineffectiveness of living. Death was commonplace, the right and wrong of it meaningless. Willy too had intended to use Duncan's rifle, except that he had expected to take the consequences.

But suddenly he felt nauseated, as though he were seeing part of himself out of context—something limp and slimy and intestinal exposed on forceps to harsh fluorescent light.

"You don't hate Bean that much," he said.

"I hate him so much I can taste it. He's rotten. He's yellow. He didn't dare patrol them hills, and he treats us like scum while he sits over there swillin' liquor every goddamn night. He picked on you till there's nothin' left to pick on, but now he's tangled with somebody who won't put up with tin-horn guff. I'll plug the bastard, so help me."

Then Willy saw movement in that opposite corridor. Windows lined its entire length, and in dim light he saw someone emerge at the head of the stairs. As soon as his gaze shifted, Gosse also turned.

They both recognized the pudgy figure of Captain Bean walking

pompously down the corridor toward the wine mess. They both saw the enlisted bartender slide his comic book under the counter and get to his feet before the captain reached the open doorway and went in. Willy felt his old familiar revulsion at the man's very presence, as he had felt it on liberty in the department store, as he felt it for snakes and spiders and centipedes. Why not kill them?

Gosse moved quickly to Duncan's cot and took down the M-1 rifle from the wall above it. Willy stood up. A nerve impulse, one tightened finger muscle on a trigger mechanism, and you no longer had to live with false accusations and a sense of failure. The captain leaned on the bar with his back to the door, in full light, a perfect target, waiting for the bartender to mix him a drink. It was precisely the opportunity Willy had waited for, yet now it had lost consistency.

And then Willy saw someone else emerge at the head of the stairway over there. Another officer started down the corridor toward the bar, and Willy recognized him too.

"Wait," he said.

"Not on your life." Gosse loaded the rifle.

"Someone else is comin'."

Gosse sat down on Duncan's cot, out of sight, the rifle on his lap.

"Don't kid me, Willy."

"No kiddin'. Doc Frechette."

The doctor reached the doorway and turned in, blocking the view of the captain. He stopped without entering, as though he had not expected to find anyone else there and did not especially care to join him. But in a moment he stepped to the corner of the bar, just as the captain moved away from it into the hidden part of that room.

Don't let his type condition your life, Willy . . .

And suddenly Willy felt so tired that his body sagged. He was tired of Gosse and the captain and all enforced military associations. He was tired of being a low-down private and watching people die and seeing them buried. He was tired of Dear John letters and suicides and deadly ruins. He was tired of hate and

filth and being bowed to by these poor defeated Japs. He had not known you could get so tired without constant physical exertion, yet he was tired with a chronic tiredness that made mere muscular fatigue seem wholesome. He had no energy left for killing or preventing it.

"Turn out the light," Gosse was saying. "It won't look as accidental with the light out, but you can back me up."

Willy went to his cot and took down his combat jacket and put it on. He was not sure he had energy enough to get out of that room.

"Wait a minute," Gosse said, pig-eyed and vicious with the loaded rifle across his lap, its muzzle edging toward Willy's groin. "You're not gonna squeal on me, you chickenshit coward."

Willy reached up and turned out the overhead light. He stepped close to Gosse so he would not have to raise his voice.

"Go ahead," he said. "Do anything you want, only don't lean on me. I'm too tired. I'm just plain too damned tired."

Then he walked slowly out of the room and down the corridor toward the front of the building, his heavy boondockers echoing loudly on bare wooden floors until he reached the foot of the stairs and went outside. He walked slowly past the headquarters building and the field next to it and the mess hall and other barracks buildings until he came to the creek that bordered camp. Then he sat down with his hands in his jacket pockets and shivered as if he had a malarial chill.

I don't care, he thought. I don't care about anything that ever happens again as long as I'm not involved in it.

The night was cold with a seasonal coldness that reminded him of lost stateside autumns. The air was fresh even with its undertones of night soil. The running water sounded limpid and rustic even with a known content of foreign fecal matter. And suddenly he wanted to go home so badly that it was a thing he might have reached out and touched—something solid and tough and convoluted like a spiral of heavy black wrought iron. It was not even any specific home he wanted, just stateside, the place he had come

from, the place he remembered as ordinary and normal and undamaged by long long wars.

Please, he thought. I never prayed for anything, but I always believed things could be better than people let them be. Don't pound on me any more. Don't keep me here any longer . . .

He sat there until his dungarees were damp and he had to move to get warm. Then he paced back and forth along the creek bank until he heard men coming from the regimental movie and knew Gosse had not done it and would not be able to do it tonight. Nothing was solved, yet it had been postponed for a while. Maybe sleep would somehow help.

Taps went before he got to the barracks, a recorded taps through loud-speakers, scratchy and crude. The light was out in his room when he got upstairs, and all of them were in bed. On the wall above Duncan's cot he saw the M-1 in a streak of light from the corridor, but it hardly seemed vital to him. Its further use might be avoided.

5

The next morning they were stationed on MP duty in the Bomb area. They wore starched khaki, helmet inner-liners painted with white bands and circles, and ponchos tucked over the back of cartridge belts. They had been issued carbines for the day and carried them loaded and slung. He and Gosse were at opposite ends of a temporary bridge where traffic had to move one way at a time. Traffic was heavy.

Hundreds of Japs plodded back and forth on a single cleared road between outlying country and the remaining part of town. They walked with eyes lowered and hands fastidiously over their noses against dust rising from passing jeeps and their own feet. Some of them pulled two-wheeled carts or led oxen or carried bundles on their backs. Only riders in jeeps looked boldly at the wreckage, and their faces were grim.

It all lay as it had fallen nearly two months ago. More than a

square mile of rubbish lay there with nothing for the eye to focus on except a few black skeletons of trees or tilted black telephone poles. No houses remained standing. No patches of ground had been cleared for gardens. Wherever you looked there was rubble and more rubble, and even on steep hills around the valley buildings had been gutted. The October sky was hazy, and the haze seemed a lingering emanation from tens of thousands who had died there—newborn ghosts reluctant to leave.

"Snap out of it," Gosse called. All traffic over the bridge had stopped while Private Willy stared at desolation instead of attending to duty. "What the hell got into you last night?"

"I'll tell you later," Willy said. He stepped back to let traffic from his side move across the narrow bridge. He had not been alone with Gosse this morning to explain that decompression could take place without bends, but he saw that it would not be easy to decompress Gosse anyway. "Listen though. Don't foul up my rotation."

Gosse swore raptly and obscenely in his cripple-mouthed way, as if passing Japanese were not only shut off by a language barrier but were less noticeable in any case than dust from their feet.

"I'll do it yet," he said. "Next time Frechette won't butt in."

Willy stepped into the road again, and Gosse let people on his side start across the bridge. It seemed impossible to worry about that sort of thing here. Willy stared again at ruins.

He thought he could pick out the center of the explosion. Nothingness was greater there, debris more finely pulverized and flattened. Behind Gosse the steel frame of a large factory lay smashed and twisted as though a tremendous weight had fallen from this end toward the other—as though an adult misstep had crushed a child's toy flat under the heel but not quite so flat under the toe. And far to Willy's right he saw another steel factory frame squashed in the opposite direction. The Bomb must have exploded between those two frames. Its primary target had been an industrial area, yet you could not pinpoint such a force. Workers' homes had been crowded around factories, and on the hills had been a medical college and hospital. Now there were strewn acres of atom-

ized junk. They said this destruction did not match that at Hiroshima, but it made fighting on Saipan, even on Tarawa, look scrabbling and pitiful.

Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared.

Periodically he stepped aside to let survivors pass, but he kept looking back at the result of energy too suddenly released. It did appall him today, and he kept trying to imagine the thing. A single plane high in the sky, a familiar B-29 from Tinian, then behind it the blossom of a parachute descending slowly with a fantastic mechanism swinging beneath it, drifting for lazy moments like a witless dandelion seed. Then the explosion. Nuclear fission—atmospheric pressure increased a thousand billionfold, the heat of the sun's center intensified, energy from mass times the speed of light squared . . .

The formula, the organization expressed, the implied *scheme* that Salty used to talk about, fascinated him. It had the ring of highest wisdom. It was worthy of God. It had a magnitude and scope that indicated the whole startling structure of the universe. It was demonstrable and truly filled you with awe, yet what was energy besides destruction? He wanted to know everything about this subject. It must surely be the key to a full understanding of earth and space and life, the unity of God's entire astonishing creation.

But of course man as usual had misapplied what he had learned. Destruction should not be the use of knowledge. When Gosse called impatiently again, Willy stepped aside once more to watch the defeated pass.

A bare-legged, bowlegged old man with a knotted stave hobbled onto the bridge. A shriveled gray-haired woman followed, carrying on her back a hay crotch with a single straw sack of rice tied to it. A man in a military cap pulled a wooden cart containing another single sack of rice while his wife pushed the cart from behind, a sleeping child strapped to her back. Two men led an ox, and behind them came a man bent double under the weight of a sick woman riding his back. The lame and able, old and young passed, the survivors who would have to repave these roads stone

by stone, rebuild their houses stick by stick, replant the land seed by seed and fertilize it with scooperful after scooperful of stinking night soil, because of One Bomb. !

The slow flow of patience and misery through ruin made Willy ache. His nation had indeed crushed another nation, as he had once thought he was seeing done at Tarawa, but the starkness of final victory shocked him. They were misguided people brought to outrageous catastrophe, but people nevertheless. Maybe their defeat was necessary, but still it was awful. It had been done with his help and the extraordinary help of plutonium from his onetime home in Hanford, and he felt humility.

Then on Gosse's side of the bridge he saw a jeep stop. He stepped out promptly to halt traffic on his own side and let it cross. As soon as the jeep was on the bridge he tensed with an old habit of hate.

Captain Bean sat beside the driver. In the back seat were Sgt. Barnard and a Corporal of the Guard. Willy hardly noticed them as he stared at the captain, his breath held, his mind going fuzzy with that basic glandular resentment for a man who seemed bound to torment him. Today he carried a loaded carbine. Maybe now it would have to be done.

The jeep stopped beside him. Automatically Willy saluted and reported his post. The captain returned the salute as if it were an effort to recognize the private. At close range his eyes were blood-shot, but he did not let you look at them very long.

"Willy the dilly," he said. "Hard up for men, Sergeant?"

"Yessir. Had to use all hands, sir."

The captain slumped in his seat and looked past Willy at the ruins. He smiled, as though the extensive damage were his own handiwork.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" he asked Willy.

"Yessir."

"Any of these yellow buggers giving you trouble?"

"Nosir."

"Well keep on your toes, lad." The captain watched a string of Japs approach to cross the bridge, deliberately holding them up,

keeping Willy waiting at attention, making the most of his authority as Officer of the Day. He seemed to have nothing better to do. "We've got 'em by the short hair," he said. "So bear down. Let 'em know they lost." He stared at the butt of Willy's carbine as though it were too much trouble to raise his eyes to the man's face. "Use that weapon if they so much as look at you cross-eyed. If you knock off a few it might make up for those two deck courts in your record book."

Willy flinched. The man believed this. He was incapable of dignity, pity, or human understanding. He had nothing inside him to back up twin silver bars on his collar, and Willy saw with abrupt surprise the childish sag of the captain's mouth, the blankness of his pale plump face, the intrinsic weakness of his damp gray eyes. The war, or the end of it, had drained him of some essential ingredient, and now he was only another misguided casualty, an incipient alcoholic. That was why he spent almost every night in the officers' wine mess. He had no other use for off-duty time, and on duty he merely exercised authority for the sake of authority without bothering to examine reasons for it. You did not have to hate him, because there was simply nothing there to hate.

And then in the corner of his eye Willy caught sight of khaki moving onto the bridge behind the jeep. He knew instantly what it was, and at the same time he shouted and began running.

"Don't, Gosse!"

It was so foolish because Gosse was as stupid as the captain. Neither had sense enough to judge the other. But Gosse had already unslung his carbine and started to kneel where he could aim past Sgt. Barnard at the captain. The Japs were taking no part in it, standing with eyes lowered as if now the victors were less noticeable than dust, patiently waiting for the bridge to be cleared again.

Willy ran toward Gosse out of a disinterested necessity to prevent the same idiocy he had nearly fallen into. Sgt. Barnard, the Corporal of the Guard, and Captain Bean had all turned as soon as Willy yelled, yet none of them seemed to realize what Gosse would shoot at. Willy expected the shot before he got there, but he

aimed a kick at Gosse's supporting arm as though he had made the run for a football kickoff, approaching at an angle barely out of the line of fire. Gosse squeezed off his shot just as the carbine sailed out of his hands and across the bridge. Willy fell on top of him and felt his own carbine muzzle hit the back of his head and knock the helmet inner-liner over his eyes. He struggled blindly to hold Gosse down until help arrived.

"Damn you," Gosse said in a furious whimper. "I coulda said Japs did it. I coulda said they grabbed my carbine, you damn fool."

Then Sgt. Barnard, the Corporal of the Guard, and the jeep driver were all holding Gosse's writhing arms and legs, and Willy felt his own strength leave him. He crawled off Gosse and stood up, panting.

"You double-crossing little bastard," Gosse said.

Willy turned to see if Bean had been hit. The shot had missed him entirely, but the captain had slid out of his seat to crouch on his knees in the dust beside the jeep, his mouth open and his eyes wide. He looked scared and fat and pathetic.

"What happened?" he said. "What happened, lad? What happened?"

Willy spit dust from his mouth and brushed his clothes. He felt as though nuclear fission had taken place within him too, expelling neutrons of self-pity and gamma rays of hate, leaving him shaken and altered and even tired, but considerably wiser.

"Take it easy," he said. "It's all right, Captain. Gosse musta flipped and thought Japs were making a banzai. But you're okay now."

Then Willy sat down on the rear bumper of the jeep and hung his head and thought Oh God, Oh God. Take me home. Let me be. Give me a chance.

And have whole streams of blood been spilt in vain?

coda

Their ship left Sasebo on 7 December 1945, and by Christmas Eve they were nearing San Diego. The breakfast chow line moved through a passageway in officers' country to the head of a ladder leading down to the mess hall. From a loud-speaker in the passageway came the voice of Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas." Nobody talked.

Private Willy watched the record spin in a tiny compartment where he had charge of recreational gear for the troops. It was next to the chaplain's office and was not big enough for a chair. Willy sat on the deck beside the turntable. Before they had sailed Sgt. Barnard asked him if he would like the job, and it had been something to do. He had an early chow pass so that he could play music for the regular chow line. He could go to the ship's library after hours and read as late at night as he wanted. The chaplain did not bother him much.

When the record ended he set the needle at the beginning again. The song made him oddly homesick for the few peacetime Christmases he did remember, and the men asked for it often. It expressed something none of them were quite willing to say out loud,

and at least you were glad to be returning to the possibility of clean white snow.

A voice behind him said good morning. Willy looked around to see the chaplain standing in the doorway. He was a middle-aged man with thick black eyebrows and graying hair. He had a friendly manner without being sanctimonious, yet it still mattered that he was a lieutenant commander. Rank still had importance, although soon now you could once more judge men by themselves rather than by a glance at insignia on their sleeves, collars, or shoulders.

"Have you been on deck, Andy?" the chaplain asked.

"Not this morning, sir."

"We've sighted land." The chaplain smiled, but Willy was not used to smiling. He stared at the spinning platter on the turntable. The chaplain stepped behind him and hoisted himself onto an upright crate of baseball bats in the corner. "How long since you've been stateside?"

"Almost thirty months, sir."

"Thirty months." The chaplain whistled. "Two and a half years."

"Yessir."

"It must have seemed terribly long. As I remember, Andy, time always goes slowly for young men, and overseas it must have seemed eternal."

"I guess it sort of did."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be twenty next month, sir."

"Good Lord. I'd have said twenty-two or twenty-three. I didn't realize anybody had spent two and a half years on those islands before their twentieth birthday."

"Quite a few of us have, Padre. If we lived through it."

"How many combat stars?"

"Three."

"Any medals?"

"Nosir. Not even a Purple Heart."

"Well, the decorations never have taken into account daily heroism, and I'm glad there's no Purple Heart. Do you have any

regrets, Andy?" Willy glanced up at him. "I mean, do you feel your tour of duty served any purpose whatsoever, or are you mostly bitter?"

"I suppose it was necessary," Willy said. He looked down at the record nearing its end. "Someone had to do it."

"Don't you resent the fact that it had to be you?"

"Sometimes. But I'd probably enlist again if I had to."

"How come you enlisted in the first place?"

"Oh." He remembered Judy Powell and her refusal to marry him. But that was not the whole reason. "Mainly to prove I was a man."

"And did you?—to your own satisfaction?"

"I think so. Except I'm not sure men are very smart after all."

"Evidence is against it, all right. What are your plans now?"

Willy hesitated. It was still strange to face a future, and it was still hard to carry on a serious conversation after thirty primitive months of repetitious profanity. He changed the record and started Bing to singing "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

"There's not much I can do except go back to school," he said.

"Good. That's what the GI Bill's for. Did you finish high school?"

"Yessir. That is they sent me a diploma."

"What college do you have in mind?"

"I don't know. I'll look around here on the coast."

"Any particular major?"

Once more Willy hesitated, afraid of sounding pretentious.

"Some branch of science," he said at last.

"Physics?"

"Maybe."

"So you can make Atom Bombs?"

"Nosir." He did not want to hurt the chaplain's feelings and did not know how to explain that science seemed closer to revealing the actual structure of the universe than theology ever had. "It's just that Nagasaki sort of shook me up about the whole business."

"Maybe philosophy and ethics on the side?" the chaplain said.

"Yessir. Whatever I can find out."

The chaplain slid down from his perch and stepped out of the compartment. In a moment he came back with a book in his hand.

"You might like to take this along and read it," he said. "I got curious myself last time we were stateside and picked it up in a second-hand bookstore. I think it's a good introduction to the field."

Willy glanced at the cover and did not take the book. It was a worn copy of Einstein and Infeld's *The Evolution of Physics*.

"I've read it," he said. The chaplain raised his heavy black eyebrows, and Willy felt embarrassed. "Those times I stood by in your office while you were gone. A lot of it's over my head, but I figure I can learn. Anyhow, I didn't think you'd mind."

"Not at all." The chaplain suddenly smiled. "I might have preferred you to read the Bible though—or maybe you have?"

"Nosir. That is, not all of it."

The chaplain laughed and leaned against the crate of baseball bats. He bounced the book lightly on his leg.

"Did you ever do any gardening, Andy? For instance, did you ever help your mother put away gladiola bulbs for the winter?"

"Nosir," Willy said. "I don't have a mother."

"I'm sorry. Do you have any family to go to?"

"A brother in Oregon I may visit."

"Well, what I was getting at is how much gardening always amazes me. For example, you dig up glads in the fall, and you'd think that alone would ruin the poor things. But you don't stop there. You knock off all the dirt, whack off the stem, break apart twins, tear off new shoots—in other words disrupt everything the plant has done during the summer. I may be a lousy gardener, but that's the way I do it. Then I toss the bulb in a basket. They're really corms, but let's call them bulbs, the little nubbin that's left. You'd think they'd never grow again, sitting five or six months away from all moisture and light and everything conducive to life. But stick them back in the ground next spring and they actually grow. Each one becomes a beautiful plant, true to type, with fine big leaves and blossoms."

"Yessir."

"I don't want to be stuffy and labor the point, but it seems to me

mankind is like that. You boys were uprooted, carted off to impossible places for long months—years in your case—with nothing conducive to growth and life. It's a wonder any of you survived, apart from death in battle itself. Yet the vital nubbin is there. Roots will go down as soon as you're stuck back in the right place."

"I suppose so, sir."

"Don't ever doubt it, Andy. I may be as poor a minister as I am a gardener, but in my opinion man is hardier than a gladiola bulb. He doesn't have to be coddled, although it's nice. He doesn't have to be preached at, although sometimes it helps. If his little nubbin of life gets good earth, sun, and fresh water—bingo, you've got roots taking hold, leaves forming, buds coming. Of course not all bulbs grow. Some rot, some are crowded out, worms get others. But a good bulb in good soil usually thrives, no matter how long its winter away from the sun."

"Yessir," Willy said. The chaplain winked at him.

"'All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field. . . .' Have you had breakfast?"

"I ate early, sir."

"Then hop out on deck and watch stateside come in. I can operate this turntable." The chaplain tossed his book onto the crate and stepped forward. "I've also been down on my knees before."

His knees creaked a bit as he took Willy's place on the deck, but Willy appreciated the chance to go topside. He got up and put on his combat jacket and waited for the chaplain to change records.

"Thank you very much, Padre," he said then. "For letting me read your books and relieving me here and everything."

"You're quite welcome. Stop in to say so long before you debark."

Private Willy passed through the chow line to the weather deck. He ducked under a cable and joined a few other men at the rail on the port bow. It was rather cold and cloudy. Wind whipped at heavy waves and occasionally tossed spray onto the deck. He shivered.

But there in the distance was land. It was hazy on the horizon, a

vague floating line of mountains scarcely distinguishable from clouds. It looked as peculiarly unreal as when he had last seen it sink away one July afternoon two and a half years ago. He knew now that it looked pretty much like New Zealand or Japan or any other large land mass first seen from the water, yet it touched a soft spot. This was home. He had scarcely expected to see it again, but there it was.

He felt no wild elation. Epic 83-A had been too long and costly for that. The absent had to be considered. Some of them had come on ahead, like Lt. McGhee and the wounded and Gosse who had been brought back for discipline. But so many were dead, so many buried.

He even felt a little afraid of returning, as Leeper had said he did, because it seemed doubtful that homebodies quite knew what had been going on overseas. Last night in the mess hall he had heard a stateside radio station for the first time in thirty months. It was immediately recognizable by the studied briskness of an announcer's voice making an implausible plea for pills. Everyone had laughed, including Willy, yet he had felt uneasy, as if that minor commercial evil proved that no major evil had ended with the advent of the Atom Bomb. And afterward an oracle-voiced news analyst had discussed Russia in a manner that recalled discussions of Germany before the late war had started, so it sounded as if homebodies were considering a new war even though demonstrations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki had made all war insupportable. And if there was to be more of it, Salty Jones and Bonelli and thousands of others buried back there would have precious little to show for their deaths. Maybe the only consolation was that they had died intact—with youth and lusts and dreams uncorroded by time and disillusion.

But you had to look forward now, since you were almost home and for the time being there was Peace on earth. Somebody had had to survive. As the chaplain said, a nubbin of life waited to put down new roots, and maybe Andrew Willy could find the necessary nourishment for good growth. More than anything he would have liked to be returning to Judy Powell. He remembered her

distinctly and without bitterness and wished she could have loved him enough to wait for him. Yet that was all past, along with everything else he had known up to this point. The thing to do now was get rid of this great tiredness and find out what life really meant.

Because I'm only twenty, he thought as he stared across the water to that hazy solidity on the horizon. And if I've learned this much I may be able to learn the rest.